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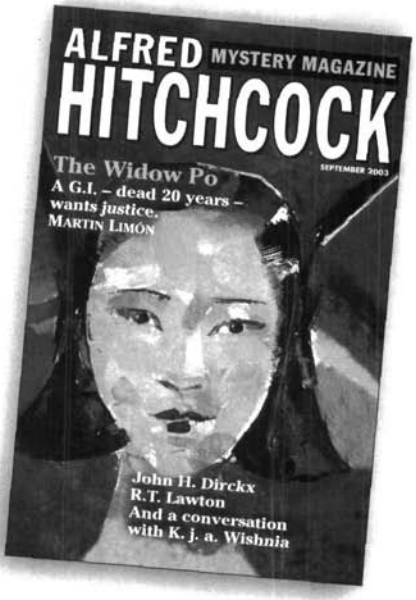

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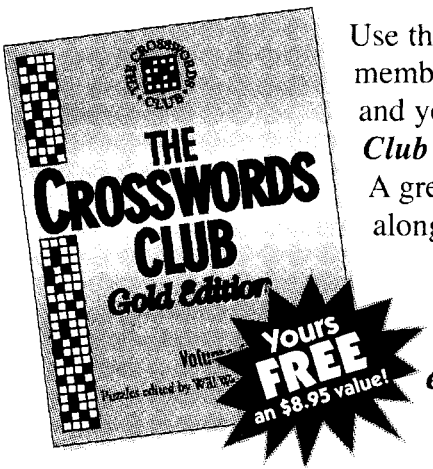

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His Deadliest Enemy

by Kate Wilhelm

It was a lovely sunny day, last day of March, crocuses up, daffodils emerging, and on the table in her house Constance had seed packets waiting. There was a large bag of starting mix in the back of the car. "Heirloom tomatoes," she had said to Charlie, who had looked blank. "Not as prolific as the newer hybrids, but better-tasting," she had gone on, to a continuing blank look. "How many tomatoes do two people need?"

He had dived behind his newspaper at that. She was smiling slightly as she drove. Thursday, her last aikido class of the week was done, and seeds were waiting. Charlie would be gone until late afternoon on Monday, or possibly Tuesday. Today plant the seeds indoors, a head start on real gardening time. Friday clear straw from the fence where she would plant peas. Saturday shop. . . .

She braked; a van was askew in the road, and a motorcycle half off the road, with a woman with a cell phone and several other people milling about a man on the ground.

Constance stopped and hurriedly got out of her car. "You're out of range here," she called to the woman. "How bad is he?"

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She ran to the man on the ground and as she started to kneel beside him, she sensed movement behind her. Something was thrown over her head, over her shoulders; she was toppled and caught as the something was pulled all the way down her body to her feet, then drawn close, pinning her arms and her legs. She felt straps or a rope tightening around her. Helpless, she didn't try to struggle, didn't bother to scream or call out as she was lifted and carried. She drew in a breath, then tried to hold her breath, but it was pointless. She was already blacking out.

Kate Wilhelm has been published widely in both mystery and science fiction, and she's a star in both genres. A recent inductee of the Science Fiction Hall of Fame, she has also won that field's Nebula, Hugo, and Jupiter awards, and the Prix Apollo. Her mystery and crime fiction work includes a series of legal thrillers which recently received the Spotted Owl Award from Friends of Mystery. The latest book in that series is *Clear and Convincing Proof* (Mira Books).

Charlie liked to fish, and he liked going fishing with Hal Mitchum, a good companion, next-door neighbor, pal, but by the time he pulled into the Mitchum driveway on Friday afternoon he admitted silently that he was pretty tired of Hal. They had left on Wednesday, and on Thursday Hal had stumbled in snow knee-deep, caught his foot in a hole, and had broken his leg. Thursday he had been in the hospital and now, Friday, Charlie was taking him home where his wife and however many of his four sons were around could listen to him complain. And Charlie would go home to his nice fire where he belonged, snuggle a bit with Constance, eat good food, and not wade through snow up to his keister. No one had expected the snow, but there it was, and the fish were probably still in Florida.

All four sons met the van in the driveway, with Doris hovering behind them. The boys were all a foot taller than their mother and a hundred pounds heavier—football players. Two of them lifted Hal and carried him, one took the crutches, and the last one grabbed his duffel bag, while Doris wrung her hands and Hal yelled back to Charlie that he would make it up to him, sorry about this, rotten luck, did he want a ride home . . .

Charlie hoisted his own duffel bag, walked around the house, and climbed the fence to the pasture, where Mitchum's goats came to see what was happening. He crossed the field, climbed the fence to his own yard, and went to the back porch door. He took his boots off on the screened porch, then entered a cold house where the three cats met him with howls of indignation and rage.

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After two steps into the kitchen, he paused. She wasn't home. He could always tell and never could have said how, but the house was not the same with her gone. Her presence filled it, made it home. Brutus, the evil striped cat, stalked angrily around his feet while Candy, the tortoiseshell, cried piteously, and Ashcan tried to climb his legs. "Where is she, you guys?" Charlie said softly. Their food dish was empty, and the water bowl was dry. He walked on through the kitchen to the other side with cats as close as shadows, and saw a letter propped against a vase of flowers on the table. Seed packets were on the table, and her car keys. He picked up the letter, opened the envelope, and read the note: "Don't do anything foolish. No police, no FBI. Sit tight and wait for a phone call. Don't use the phone. She's safe and comfortable. I trust you had a good fishing trip."

A lump as hard and cold as an iceberg settled in his stomach as he read it a second time. He let it fall to the table and stood without moving for a time, then shoved Ashcan away and went back to the cat dishes, filled one with food and the other with water to shut up the beasts. After that he prowled silently through the house. There would be a listening device, he thought, something to let them know he had returned. No one would have expected him to enter through the back door. They knew he had gone fishing. Did they know when he had planned to return? He found the small device near the front door on the underside of a low table in the foyer. He didn't touch it. It was probably voice-activated, or sound-activated, in which case the cats might have set it off with their yowling. If they had, the phone might ring any minute now. He looked at his watch, and continued his silent search. No sign of a struggle, nothing conspicuously missing. She had gone to her class in her gi, had not had a chance to change. Clothes were laid out on the bed, waiting for her.

Without a sound he went through the kitchen again, out to the porch, on to the garage, where the Volvo was parked. Her purse was on the front seat, a bag of potting soil or something in the back and, again, no sign of a struggle. Thursday, he thought then; they had taken her the day before.

Ten minutes had passed from the time he looked at his watch. He sat down at the kitchen table and examined the note again, not touching it this time, although he suspected that no fingerprints would be recoverable. Computer printout, cheap copy paper, cheap envelope, no stamp, no date. Who had known he was going fishing? A handful of locals, that was all. Ransom? He doubted that. Kidnapping was a federal crime, too risky for the meager sum he could come up with. Revenge, he thought then. And God knew he had made enemies over the years, first as an arson investigator, then a New York City detective, and most recently a pri-

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vate investigator.

He went over a mental list, shook his head. The folks he knew who might want to get even would not have written that she was safe and comfortable, and would not have added that bit about fishing. The envelope probably would have contained a bloody finger or ear.

He realized that both of his hands were aching painfully and he looked at his fists in surprise, then forced his fingers to open, to flex. The lump of ice was not melting. He wanted to kill someone.

Ransom, revenge, pure deviltry, what else? In his head he heard a voice: "You're exactly the person I want, Meiklejohn. I want your expertise."

"Merrihew," he said under his breath.

March first. Overnight snow again, and a cutting cold wind. Endless winter, Charlie thought, disgruntled, when he went outside to bring in more firewood. He took the wood to the living room, added a piece to the fire, and went back to the kitchen to give a kettle of chili a good stir. It was his day to cook. Chili, cole slaw, cornbread. Feast enough for the gods, he decided, sniffing, then tasting. Too spicy? Maybe, but it was too late to do much about it. The doorbell rang and in his continuing foul mood he went to see what idiot was out there instead of inside warm and dry.

The man on the stoop was in his sixties, red-faced, but that could have been from the wind. Dressed in a heavy mackintosh, a wool cap pulled low on his head, heavy wool pants, and worn boots. Although he was carrying a large Manila envelope, he definitely was not a salesman type.

"Merrihew," he said curtly.

Charlie opened the door wider and stepped aside. "Just long enough to get warm. Is there a driver waiting?"

"No."

Charlie glanced at his boots, dry. He would not have waded in snow in the driveway or walkway to the house. Charlie had shoveled enough snow that winter to build his own ski resort. He motioned toward the living room. "You might want to keep your heavy things on until you warm up."

Merrihew was already pulling off the mackintosh. He strode ahead of Charlie and tossed the coat onto a chair along with his cap and the bulging envelope he had brought in, then went to the fire and held out his hands to it, facing the flames. He was a heavy man, solid, not fat, as if he worked out regularly.

"Mr. Merrihew," Charlie said pleasantly, "ten days ago I told your secretary that I am not at present looking for a job. One week ago I repeated that same message to you directly. Nothing's changed. I'm still not looking for work."

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Actually, Merrihew's secretary had called and said quite coolly that her employer would consult with Charlie on Tuesday or Wednesday of the following week, and if he would name the day she would make a reservation at the Plaza for him. When Merrihew called he had said brusquely that he would make it more than worthwhile and was keeping Wednesday afternoon open and would expect Charlie at three.

Merrihew swung around and just then Constance strolled in, looking as elegant as always, in a powder-blue sweater, slim black pants, and walking shoes. Her at-home work uniform.

"Constance, meet Mr. Merrihew," Charlie said.

"Dr. Leidl, a pleasure," Merrihew said, inclining his head fractionally.

Charlie raised his eyebrows at Constance and she nodded so slightly that it might have gone unnoticed. Merrihew had done some homework. Constance had a Ph.D. in psychology.

"I want thirty minutes of your time," Merrihew said. "I'll pay whatever the going rate is plus a substantial bonus on satisfactory completion."

With an exaggerated sigh Charlie looked at his watch, then waved toward a chair and seated himself in his Morris chair. Constance settled into the wing chair opposite him, and Merrihew took the green upholstered chair that neither Constance nor Charlie ever sat in. It was not very comfortable.

"My father was a hog farmer," Merrihew said. "I hated that farm with all my soul. He died when I was sixteen and I inherited three thousand dollars; my mother got the farm. I decided to spend my inheritance traveling and I went to South America, to Peru. I wanted to see Machu Picchu. On a train I kept seeing the mountains cut into tiers, stair steps with stone retaining walls, terraces with crops growing on each level. Corn, potatoes, beans, squash. . . . It fascinated me. Those Indians did that with hand tools, baskets, no wheels, no pack animals bigger than llamas. Centuries later *they're still there, still growing crops, irrigated, drained, cared for,* and productive."

He was gazing at the fire with a contemplative expression. He sat stiller than most people, Charlie thought then, no twitches or adjustments of his position, no hand motions. As still as a buddha.

"Something happened to me on that trip," Merrihew continued. "I didn't know what it was until years later, but that's when it started. I talked my mother into giving up the farm, going into the meat-packing business instead, and I made it work. I went to school, architecture and engineering, and began to branch out in other enterprises. I made a lot of money." He wasn't boasting. His voice was dispassionate, nearly a monotone.

The cats came in and Brutus eased himself into Charlie's lap,

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Ashcan into Constance's. Candy sniffed Merrihew's feet and legs; he made a shooing motion at her, and she raised her tail and stalked out disdainfully.

"When I was twenty-nine," Merrihew said, "I went back to Peru, but that time I knew what questions to ask and who could answer. The terraces are marvels of engineering in a landmass that must be the most inhospitable on earth. The Andes are like steeples in many places, nearly vertical in others, but nothing stopped those genius engineers. Wherever they wanted terraces, they carved them out of rock and created them.

"I'm doing the same thing," he said in a lower voice.

He paused and turned his gaze to Charlie. "Twenty-five years ago I located my mountain and bought the southern flank, all of it. I put together a team of architects and engineers, and we started work on the plans. Eight years ago we started earthmoving. I realized that that was what all the money had been about, to bring to fruition my boyhood dream."

He began to describe the community he was building and his face changed, became impassioned as he leaned forward with his eyes gleaming. Each terrace was sixty feet wide, houses no more than thirty-five feet deep, backed up by the mountain on the north, clerestory windows, skylights, solar panels. An elevator, an escalator. Each to provide a lift to the next terrace, a people-mover belt to cross the space to the next elevator or escalator, stairs, all covered with clear Lexan. A four-foot-wide walkway winding through gardens along the entire length of each terrace, spectacular views from every level. . . . "From below all you will see will be some retaining walls and endless gardens rising up the mountain."

Charlie glanced at his watch. Ten more minutes.

Merrihew's eyes narrowed and he stopped talking abruptly. A moment later, in the same dispassionate way he had started, with the same nearly impassive expression he had worn, he said, "Then the accidents started. Five years ago, two men, two fatal accidents. Four years ago two more. Three years ago, two. Last year, three fatalities. Plus near-fatal accidents each and every year since they started."

"Accidents happen," Charlie commented. "Construction is a dangerous occupation. I assume there were investigations."

"Of course. Locals, state, OSHA, insurance people. I hired my own detectives two years ago. Nothing. But someone is out to destroy it all, to destroy me." A gleam in his eyes became more pronounced and made him look dangerous suddenly.

Charlie dumped Brutus, stood up, and went to the fire to give it a poke. Sparks flared and he turned back to Merrihew. "Look, it's hopeless. Accidents, all investigated, that go back five years.

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There's nothing anyone can do now. Use more caution on the job, bring in some new superintendents, new foremen, a whole new crew, whatever it takes."

"I've done all those things," Merrihew said. He stood up. "There's a person behind it. I want you to go to the site and spend a little time with the accident reports and the investigators' reports. I've looked into you, your past work. I know you push the envelope and get results. I want you, Meiklejohn, your expertise. Just find out how they got killed and who's responsible. I'll handle it from there. The end of the month or first of April. The snow will be gone by then. No work's due to start until late April. You'll have time to look around, visualize the deaths and how impossible it is that they were all accidents."

Charlie shook his head. "As I said from day one, no thanks. The end of this month I'm going fishing for four or five days and when I return, it will be tax-wrestling time. After that, my wife and I are due a little vacation. Besides, Mr. Merrihew, it's hopeless. Teams of investigators worked on it while the accidents were fresh, memories unfogged by time. There's no point."

Merrihew stood up and walked to the chair where he had tossed his coat, picked it up, and pulled it on. "I intend to see Merrihew Terraces finished in the next few years. Each time there's a new death, it's a setback in time and I don't have time. I have early symptoms of Alzheimer's, Meiklejohn, and in five or six years I might not care. But I do now. I'll be in touch."

He jammed on his cap and walked to the foyer with Constance at his side. "I'm sorry," she said, and whether she meant Charlie's refusal to take the job or Merrihew's admission of Alzheimer's was impossible to tell.

After Merrihew left, Constance picked up the bulging envelope and wandered off to her upstairs office and Charlie returned to the kitchen and the simmering chili. He tasted it again. Maybe some yogurt, he decided, wiping his eyes, to temper the fire. He had never heard of doing that, but it seemed reasonable.

At dinner later Constance took a bite of chili and, looking surprised, reached for her wine. Charlie took a bite. "It's interesting," he said. She buttered a piece of cornbread.

"His project is amazing," she said then. "The mission statement says not a single inch of arable land will be used and the development will hold two hundred fifty houses, underground parking, a big clubhouse with swimming pool and gym, guest rooms. Real individual yards plus landscaped gardens. It's really incredible."

"He's a nut," Charlie said.

She pursed her lips. She knew that after the first call Charlie had looked up Merrihew and had found enough to make him want to have nothing to do with the man. He wouldn't have anyway, she

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also knew. Charlie was as incapable of taking orders from such a man as Merrihew was incapable of not giving them.

"And he's ruthless," Charlie continued. "No opposition allowed. He squashes opposition the way a sane person would squash a bug."

"It's really visionary, a prototype of how to house people without sacrificing any more arable land."

"He's a nut. One of the richest men alive. Probably knocked off his own father to get out from under the hog farm. Dangled his mother over a cliff until she agreed to let him run things his way. He wants that mountain to stand for a thousand years with his name linked to it. Immortality. What are we going to do with that chili?"

She eyed it. "Maybe you could freeze it in ice-cube trays and we could bring it out from time to time to use as seasoning."

A little later they had ham-and-cheese sandwiches and neither of them mentioned Merrihew again, or the chili, either.

Sitting in his cold empty kitchen, Charlie took a deep breath. Merrihew had said he'd be in touch, and Charlie had no doubt that he had kept his word. His fury did not diminish, and the ice in his midsection did not melt, but he was reassured. Merrihew would not harm her, just use her for leverage. He clung to that. It was Friday, and he was not expected home until late Monday or Tuesday. Time to consider his response to Merrihew's opening move.

As silently as before, he went upstairs, gathered a few things to stuff into his duffelbag, picked up his laptop and the big envelope, returned to the kitchen. He tore open the bag of cat food and put it on the floor, then raised the lid of the toilet. She hated for him to do that, but the cats didn't object. Then he went out through the porch, back over the fence to Mitchum's house. He would make up a story for the Mitchums, borrow a car, go check into a motel, and make some phone calls. The goats did not meet him this time. They were getting milked.

Charlie had worked with Ron Shipley in the past and said that if he ever wanted another partner Ron would be it. That night at eleven, Charlie, Ron, and Lucinda Popke sat in a roadhouse near the village of Fall Creek, New Jersey. For the next several days Ron and Lucinda would be Mr. and Mrs. Jackson Callahan, a couple fed up with New York City, looking for a nice place in the country within commuting distance. Ron looked as bland as a minor accountant, reddish-blond hair thinning, wiry build, and an incredible memory. Lucinda was taller than he was, with hair dyed jet black and heavy eye makeup. She probably would chew gum while they were scouting the area, and no one would give her

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a second thought. People told her things and she talked as if she were paying absolutely no attention and never missed a trick. They would do.

"So that's it," Charlie said, pushing an envelope across the table to Ron. He had photocopied all the information Merrihew had left with him. "The construction site is about five miles from here. Who's sore about the deal? Who loses? Who gains if it's stopped in its tracks? Rumors, speculation, whatever you can dig out. I want it all." He had given them the telephone number of his own motel room, ten miles away; they would not meet in public again and he would not come back to Fall Creek again.

Behind Fall Creek the Kittatinny Mountains rose, and up there Merrihew's dream was being realized. Or not.

Constance felt as if her head were in a giant vise that tightened, relaxed, tightened again. She opened her eyes, then closed them quickly. The pounding was inside her head, in her temples, behind her eyes. After a moment she opened her eyes once more to a dimly lighted room. She was in a bed, still in her gi, her shoes off. Moving cautiously, she pushed herself to a sitting position, then didn't move again for several seconds. Dizzy. It passed and she saw that the light was coming from another room through a partly open door. Also, there was a blinking red light on a phone on a bedside table. She was so dry, she couldn't moisten her lips. Her tongue felt swollen and her eyes burned. She doubted that she could answer the phone, not with a mouth full of sawdust.

Moving with care, she got to her feet, but the dizziness was gone and she felt only an intolerable thirst and the pounding headache. She crossed the room to push open the door to a large bathroom. On the counter by the sink was an ice bucket with a bottle of water. Gratefully she opened the water and took a long drink, not bothering with the glass nearby. She drank again and saw a small medicine container, Tylenol. It held two tablets and she swallowed them both.

Holding the water bottle, sipping from time to time, she examined the bathroom. Lavish, with a gold Jacuzzi tub and a separate shower, a thick gold rug, heated towel racks. . . . She went back to the bedroom and turned on a lamp, looked at the blinking light on the phone, but did not touch it yet. The room was luxurious by any standard. King-size bed, carpeting made of pale clouds, dressing table with silver containers of face creams and lotions, a hand mirror, brush, and comb; a chair and another table next to drapes that looked like raw silk . . . Bifold closet doors, one partly open, and two regular doors. The first one she tried was locked. The other one opened to a living room as richly furnished as the rest of the suite. Another door in that room was locked. There was a televi-

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sion and a rack of movie cassettes, a CD player, music discs, a small refrigerator, microwave. She opened more silk drapes and then a sliding glass door to a balcony with bars. Unrelieved darkness was beyond the bars.

With her headache more manageable, she went back to the bedside table and picked up the telephone. A woman responded almost instantly, in an English accent: "Dr. Leidl, you have not been harmed. The headache will be gone in a few minutes, but if you require medication there is Tylenol in the bathroom, and coffee in the carafe in the other room. I shall call again in half an hour." The phone went dead.

Constance hung up, returned to the other room, and found the carafe on a table along with a bone-china cup and saucer. She poured coffee and sipped it.

Her headache was easing rapidly and she continued to explore her rooms as she waited for the next phone call. She found her watch on the dressing table: seven o'clock. She had been out for nearly seven hours. Some clothes in the closet—her size. A nightgown in a drawer along with underthings, all her size. She finished the bottle of water and looked inside the refrigerator. More water, wine, cheese, juice. Apples and oranges.

Imprisoned in a four-star hotel. Books to read, current magazines, movies, a house phone, heated towels.

Charlie would be beside himself, she thought, sitting down with a second cup of coffee on a sofa with another telephone on an end table at hand. She was glad that he was fishing, that he didn't know yet, that he would have a few more days of peace. There probably had been a message with orders for him, and whoever had set this up would not want police and FBI agents brought in. Would he obey such orders? She thought he might, this once, take orders. She thought then of the cats, with regret. It wasn't that they wouldn't survive until Charlie got home; they had their own cat door and, clever beasts, they would scrounge from neighbors, do whatever it took, but they would be very unhappy. She amended that: They would be mad as hell.

Exactly half an hour after the first call, the telephone rang. The same Englishwoman said without preamble, "Your dinner has been sent to the anteroom adjoining the living room. Please do not remove any of the silver or china. When you have finished, return to the living room and close the connecting door. If you desire anything else, you have only to lift the phone and advise us. We shall try to make your stay comfortable." The line went dead.

Constance walked to the door that had been locked earlier, and this time the knob turned and the door opened. She stepped into the anteroom, about as big as the bathroom on the other side of the wall, uncarpeted, and bare except for a chair and a serving

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cart with a white tablecloth, gleaming silver, crystal glasses, good china, chafing dishes, and a lovely salad in a bowl on a bed of ice. There was another door that she didn't bother to test. It would be locked. They were taking no chances.

They knew she was trained in martial arts. The way they had caught her, immobilized her, now this. They knew. She glanced at the door she had just opened, and suspected that when she closed it again, it would automatically lock, but at the moment she was too hungry to examine it closely. She started to uncover chafing dishes, to look at the white wine in a cooler, another bottle of red wine, both already opened. She sat down to eat her dinner.

When she finished, she did as she had been instructed, returned to the living room and closed the connecting door behind her; it locked as she had thought it would. She stood by it listening closely. Fifteen minutes later she heard movement behind the door; the other door closed.

By ten that night she knew there was no town or road for a good distance behind her rooms, just impenetrable darkness. She had figured out the locks to the door between the bedroom and living room, and assumed the lock on the anteroom door to the hall was exactly the same, and she knew she could open it, if she could find a tool to use. Where she was was more problematic. If she had been driven in the van she had seen, she could be in Vermont or New Hampshire, even Canada. If they had boarded her on a plane, she could be just about anywhere. She turned on the television—Disney, more cartoons, History Channel . . . nothing local, no news. When the Weather Channel came in, unblocked, she watched. Temperatures in Fahrenheit. Good. She was still in the states, then. And it was still freezing at night north of Rochester. Thoughtfully, she put an inch of water in a glass and set it out on the balcony.

She took a long bath, thinking hard, and formed what might be a plan, she told herself derisively. She had found nothing she could use as a tool to take apart the door locks.

Up before daylight the next morning, she checked the water on the balcony and found it cold but liquid. And as far as she could see, there was nothing but forest climbing a mountain.

The blinking light, the nice English-accented voice, breakfast. The same instructions as before. In the anteroom she picked up the knife, but knew it would not work to take apart the door locks. The end was too blunt, the screws too deeply recessed. The lock on the door to what she assumed would be a hall was like the others. And that door was locked. The lock to the living room door was different and was new. Not a simple doorknob lock this time. She examined it, and the recess where the bolt would slide in. Then she ate her breakfast.

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While she was in the anteroom, someone had entered the bedroom, changed the bed, brought in fresh towels, left, all without a sound. She assumed the connecting door had been locked while that was going on. And that was what this day would be all about, she told herself: Learn the routine being followed. Watch the shadows in the forest, orient herself so that when she left she would not become lost in a wilderness. There had to be a driveway, access to a road, on the other side of the building, and that was how she planned to make her way out of here.

That morning she mangled silk panties, tore off enough of the fabric to make a wad that would fit into the recess of the bolt; she watched shadows and learned that her windows were facing northeast. She was probably on the fourth floor of the building. It would be hard to make her way down the building if the rest of it was constructed the way the visible part was. Smooth wooden siding, no handholds. She definitely did not want to drop two or more floors to the ground. She eyed the raw silk drapes speculatively, then nodded. Not the sheets; the maid would raise an alarm. After lunch, she told herself, she would work on the drapes.

When her lunch was brought in, she tried out the wad of silk, stuffed it into the recess with a tag end hanging out, then cautiously closed the door. It did not lock. She opened it again. She didn't think they would bother to lock the hall door when this one was closed, not with that new lock. Why bother? And if it turned out to be locked, she would try something else, she told herself. As before, she waited until she heard someone removing the serving cart, the other door being closed, then another few minutes. She opened the anteroom door, and stood for a minute or two listening. When she tried the door to the hall, it opened. She didn't open it more than enough to make certain, closed it again, removed the silk wad, and closed the other door. Now it locked.

Examining the drapes, she knew that she had to have something that could cut through the fabric. It was heavy, and raw silk was tough. She had used her teeth to start a tear on the panties. She went back to the bedroom and picked up the hand mirror from the dressing table, took it to the bathroom, thought a moment, then went back to the closet and found a silk shirt. She wrapped the mirror in it, banged it on the counter, and took it to the living room where she carefully opened the shirt and picked up a shard of glass. She had to cut the drapes in daylight. It would be too conspicuous if someone glanced up and saw her destroying them at night, outlined by the light in the room. When she was done, she had cut the silk into eight strips, and with the drapes opened all the way, the fabric bunched, she hoped nothing would be noticeable with a casual glance. The rest would have to wait until the next day.

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That afternoon she studied the bars on her balcony. New, like the automatic lock, and strong enough. They enclosed only her part of the balcony. She gazed at the forest, rising out of sight, deciduous trees not leafed out yet, brambles, scattered spruce and fir trees. It would not provide a lot of cover, but that couldn't be helped. She would have four to five hours, she hoped, a good head start. No one should miss her until lunch, unless someone saw her rope, and that could happen at any time. There were too many unknowns for comfort, but that couldn't be helped, either. How many people were in the building? Were there watchmen scattered around? Was the building perched on a cliff or something like that? Tomorrow, she told herself.

She got up before daylight the following day, dressed in the darkest clothes in the closet: black velvet pants, gray cashmere sweater, not appropriate garb for a hike in the forest, but her gi, which would provide much more protection, was white and too bulky to wear under the other things. She quickly detached the drapes from the pins and made her rope, tied it securely to a bar, and left the other end within reach of the continuation of the balcony without bars. Then breakfast was brought in.

After the breakfast things were cleared away, she opened the door, took out the wad of silk and closed the door, then went to the other door and listened for several minutes. She opened it a crack, wider, and left her prison. The room next to hers was another luxurious bedroom, empty. She crossed it swiftly, went to the balcony, drew her rope to her, and began her descent.

At that moment Charlie was listening to Phil Stern. "Do you know what time it is? Saturday morning, eight o'clock, for God's sake!"

"I know what time it is, Phil," Charlie said softly. "I need that information and I need it today, this morning. You can get it for me."

There was a slight pause, then Phil asked, "Are you in trouble?"

"Not yet," Charlie said. "You have this number. Give me a call when you find out." He hung up. He and Phil went back a lot of years, to college days, and he had done a lot of work for the insurance association Phil worked for. He would deliver. But it would take a little time. He would have to go to his office, do some computer research, call back . . . Two or three hours, Charlie decided.

He made two more calls: He wanted to know if Merrihew's corporate jet was still parked wherever he kept it, and if it had made a trip in the past two days. And he wanted to know where Merrihew was at present. Charlie knew he lived in a Manhattan penthouse apartment, but was he there? Now he could only wait for information, and seethe. And worry. What if he was wrong? What

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if Merrihew was not involved and he was missing the phone call that could tell him what to do to get her back?

Scowling at the telephone, he remembered his own advice to a rookie detective many years earlier: Until you have a solid lead, you go with your hunches. What he couldn't do was sit in that cold empty house and wait for a call that probably wouldn't come until Monday.

He picked up the sheaf of accident reports, compiled by one of the biggest private detective agencies in New York City, and began to read.

Constance dropped to the ground and crouched, then crept to the nearest shrubs and waited a moment, peering out. The rising forested hillside extended behind the building with no one in sight. She ducked under windows and kept to the shrubs around the back of the building, then stopped again when she reached the corner. Big gardens lay ahead. She retreated. Gardeners might be out there working already. She retraced her path back the other way and came to a parking lot with half a dozen cars, as well as the white van and motorcycle. Keeping behind cars as much as possible, she raced through the lot, into the woods beyond, and paused to look back at the building she had just left. It was a big fancy hotel, with a satellite dish on the roof. Still no alarm. What she wanted to do was get across the driveway and start down, but it was too risky here. Woods had been cleared on the other side of the driveway and she had glimpsed wide stairs going down. More of the estate, more gardens, something else to be avoided. She headed west into denser woods.

Twice she stretched out as flat as she could on the ground, within sight of the driveway, when she heard a car coming. Slipping and sliding in mud, clambering over rocks and fallen trees, she picked her way through the forest, sometimes angling more northward than she wanted when steep terrain made it unavoidable, and she always turned south and west when she could, and tried to keep the driveway not too distant until she could cross it.

She was scratched, her clothes muddy and torn, her shoes threatening to fall apart. Court shoes were not designed for a wilderness trek. Blisters were starting to throb on both feet. She rested more often as the sun climbed higher, and where the breeze had been too cool earlier, now it was too warm, although in sheltered places snow pocketed the rocky ground. Reluctantly she forced herself upright and onward again and again, afraid that she was still too close, and also that she might stiffen if she stopped very long.

At eleven-thirty she heard the unmistakable roar of a motorcycle, closely followed by a second racing car. Or van, she thought,

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crouching behind a rock. She suspected they had missed her. She sat down and rested, leaning against the big rock. What would they do? Send searchers into the woods? Park along the driveway, or out on a road and wait for her to show up? Get tracking dogs?

Wearily she considered her next move. She had thought she might get to a real road and hitch a ride to the nearest town; now she was afraid to try that. Not if they were patrolling the driveway and the road it had to lead to eventually. Several times she had approached the driveway, intending to cross, continue on the other side. Each time she had retreated. It apparently was a lot steeper on the south side, in some places with guard rails signifying a cliff over there. But she couldn't wait until she reached a county or state road. She had to be on the other side by then. South and west, she told herself. She had to continue southward and westward. And if she had to stay in woods all the way to civilization, so be it.

She started again, this time turning south, toward the driveway. The brambles weren't too bad in the woods proper, but closer to the gravel driveway, with more sun and more space, they thrived, and she kept having to detour or risk being shredded. Later, she heard another car coming, and tried to make herself invisible among the brambles. Peering out, she saw a Honda rounding a bend, going up; it drew closer and she saw Charlie at the wheel. Ignoring the brambles now she pushed her way through as the car drove past. She stood in the middle of the driveway waving her arms, and felt tears of frustration fill her eyes. Then the brake lights came on, and the car began to race backward.

She jumped to the side of the driveway; he jerked to a stop and leaped out to hold her so tightly that she couldn't breathe.

"Are you all right? You're bleeding. What did they do to you?"

She struggled for air and gasped. "I'm all right, scratched. We have to get out of here. They're looking for me. A white van and a motorcycle."

He yanked open the back door of the car. "On the floor. We're leaving." She closed her eyes as he raced backward again, stopped, made a tortuous turn, and sped on down the driveway. She was glad she couldn't see ahead.

"Tell me," he said.

"You first. How did you find me?"

"Phil found out where Merrihew had property insured. DeHaven House was high on the list. An executive hideaway in the Poconos, two hours out of New York, where he meets with European movers and shakers, others from the states. Next on the list was a hunting lodge in Idaho, another place in Oahu."

Merrihew! She had not even given him a thought.

"You talk. I drive," Charlie said then. "We'll come to the road in a

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few minutes and there's a white van cruising. Keep your head down. I don't want to have to start shooting."

But he would if he had to, she understood. She had felt his revolver under his windbreaker. She scrunched down lower and started to tell him. He stopped, turned, and she felt the difference when they were on the state road. He stopped speeding, not wanting to attract attention now.

A white van passed him and kept going and a minute or so later a motorcycle passed going the other way. "They're looking," he murmured. "Stay down a few more miles."

She stayed down another half-hour, until they crossed a bridge and entered Port Jervis, New York, the point where New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania come together.

"Find a Goodwill store," she said, pulling herself up to the seat painfully. She felt stiff and sore all over. "You have to get me a few clothes, then a gas station where I can wash my face and change, and then a proper department store."

Charlie grinned. "Shopping, that's all you gals know." There was no mirth in his expression when he looked at her in the rearview mirror and saw long scratches with dried blood on her cheek.

"Charlie, what are you going to do?"

"Kill him," he said.

She drew in a breath. "That's for later. I mean now, today, this afternoon?"

"Let you clean up a bit, get something to eat, get a motel room or probably a suite, wash your back, tuck you in for a nap. All that hiking, you must be tired. Leave a message for Ron to call me later at the new number, watch you rest."

She nodded. "Sounds reasonable. You must be tired, too. Stress is fatiguing."

"I'll help you rest," he said, and this time his grin was sincere.

By late Sunday evening they had both read every accident report several times, studied an enlargement of the work site, and now Constance was sitting on the floor by a coffee table, placing Go pieces as markers on the schematic. Charlie was on the couch behind her. There were five levels at the construction site, each twenty to twenty-five feet higher than the one below. The white Go pieces represented construction workers who had been in the approximate vicinity of the victim, and that one's piece was black.

"Number one," Charlie said when she drew back from the table. "Truck backed up and hit the guy. Pure accident. Witnessed by five or six guys."

She nodded and removed that piece.

"Two," he said. "Crane broke and dumped a load of dirt on the guy below. Again, many witnesses. Accident." She removed the

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marker. "Three. Guy stumbled and fell down the elevator shaft."

She hesitated. "He fell about twenty feet. That's the kind of thing people survive all the time."

"Not this guy," Charlie said. "You can fall over a curb and buy the farm if you're unlucky."

"You really think they were all accidents, don't you?"

"Yep. And the people who were hurt and survived said the same thing. Accidents. Or else you have a bunch of different killers knocking off workers. No one person was at each accident site, remember."

"One was after the third accident," she said. "That's when Merrihew started hanging around, keeping an eye out, he said."

"Right. And he didn't see a thing that contradicted the accident reports. The next guy apparently didn't notice a bulldozer heading his way and stepped in front of it. The driver couldn't see him. Bingo."

"How can you not notice a bulldozer?" She put the black stone near the bottom of the mountain where a road had been extended. She put another marker near it, one with a black cross on white. Merrihew's marker. "He said his back was turned."

Charlie nodded. "Honey, he's paid a fortune to have this whole mess investigated. Rudy Carlucci has a good bunch of people working for him and he doesn't come cheap, but he is thorough."

She nodded. They had known Rudy back in New York in years past, and she suspected his investigators were as good as Charlie said. "And this one." She touched another black piece with the marked piece near. "Electrocuted. No one noticed the red warning light in time. Merrihew was there and didn't see the light."

Charlie grunted. "That's how accidents happen. Someone goofs, doesn't notice a warning, steps in front of a bulldozer, falls down a shaft, gets hit by a load of lumber being hoisted in place. All avoidable, if someone's paying attention." He watched her remove another black piece, with the cross-marked piece close to it. "What are you getting at?"

"I don't know. It's just . . . uncanny, maybe. Too many accidents. Witnesses. Merrihew right there time after time, his back turned, looking the other way, preoccupied by something or other. It feels wrong. Don't you think so?"

"Accidents tend to feel wrong," he said. "You can always point and say if he had done this instead of that it wouldn't have happened. That's what makes them accidents."

She continued to regard the Go pieces. "I don't blame Merrihew," she said. "I'd want another investigation, too."

"You're starting to sound like the people Ron and Lucinda talked to. Ghosts, evil spirits, curses."

Ron and Lucinda had checked in with their report that afternoon. Merrihew had met opposition years ago, they had said, but

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he had made promises and kept them and the mood had changed to acceptance and then to anticipation of the change in fortune the development would make in the area. He had not demanded tax breaks and, in fact, having construction workers move in had been an economic piece of good luck for a depressed town. Folks were looking forward to having two hundred and fifty affluent buyers move to the area. Businesses had started to expand in anticipation. Now pessimism had set in. There was general agreement that the project was cursed, doomed.

Constance gazed broodingly at the remaining markers. Every remaining black one had one with a cross very near. And he never saw a thing until too late.

She knew that if she looked up, caught Charlie's gaze on her, she would see a strange opaque flatness in his eyes. They could look like chips of obsidian at times, and at those times she was afraid, never of him, but for him. Years earlier, when he had insisted that she take martial-arts training, he had said that if anyone ever hurt her, she'd better take care of him herself and it would be self-defense, because if she didn't, he would, and it would be murder. He had said he would kill Merrihew, and she did not doubt for a second that he meant it. She had not referred to it yet, and she would not until her scratches were completely healed, gone. Again and again she caught him examining her cheek, her hands, and arms with that cold hard look in his eyes.

"You know what I think?" Charlie said, placing his hand on her head.

"Not a clue."

"I think that it's ten after six, and that if we were to go to the desk and ask very nicely about a good restaurant not too far away, we would be given directions to a little place off the main drag that just happens to have a master chef in the kitchen and, furthermore, that the clerk on duty would be more than happy to call ahead and make us a reservation."

"I think you're brilliant," she said, rising.

Two hours later Constance put down her fork and sighed. Her veal marsala had been excellent, and the pinot gris superb. She watched Charlie examine the duck bones on his plate searching for a morsel that might have escaped earlier. The bones were picked clean. When the waiter appeared to inquire about dessert she shook her head, and Charlie looked over the menu. "Chocolate mocha torte with raspberry filling," he said. "Two forks. And coffee."

He leaned back with a contented look. "Told you there'd be a place like this tucked away."

"How can you possibly want dessert?"

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"Since you won't give me any at home, I seize the moment whenever I can."

After coffee and the torte had been served, she said, "Something I wanted to ask and forgot. Why do you suppose Merrihew held out the last page of Rudy's report?"

He shook his head. "Probably just a summation of everything that went before. Who needs it?"

"I think we do," she said thoughtfully. "And why did Merrihew cut Rudy out and want you in? Aside from the fact that you're a genius, I mean."

"Honey, leave it alone. The reports speak for themselves. Accidents up and down the line. Rudy knows that and so does Merrihew, and why he won't admit it I don't know and don't care."

"It could be important," she said, still thoughtful. "Kidnapping me was an act of desperation. You said he was unscrupulous, but that was an extreme act. He's desperate, Charlie. I just wonder why."

Charlie nudged the torte to the center of the table and, smiling, she nudged it back.

"Okay," he said after taking another bite. "The summation probably suggests that there's only one person who could have been responsible for eight deaths. Merrihew himself. And he can't accept that, but neither can he accept eleven accidental deaths. It's a dilemma for him, and he wants an out."

She nodded approvingly. "You've thought that all along, haven't you?"

"Yes. But so what? If they were accidents, God's turned against him, something like that. And the role of Job has little appeal at his age. He wants a flesh-and-blood villain."

"One he would kill," she said.

"Without a qualm. He wants that project built while he has his faculties more or less intact. God alone knows how many millions he's already put into it. No consortium, no backers, his own money. He has no intention of sharing immortality."

"Does he have siblings?"

"A sister, a couple of years younger than he is. A doctor, I think, in the Philadelphia area. Why?"

"I want to talk to her."

Charlie put his fork down and picked up his coffee, regarding her over the rim with his curiously opaque eyes flat and hard. "Why?"

She could not tell him that she intended to do whatever she could think of to prevent his going after Merrihew. Instead, she said, "I don't know exactly. A nagging feeling that we're missing something. Look, he doesn't know when to expect you to return from your fishing trip. As far as he knows I'm wandering around in the forest, lost, in a ravine, eaten by bears, whatever. He must be in a sweat. Let's let him sweat another day, head for Philadel-

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phia, talk to the sister, and then decide what to do next."

That was a problem, they had decided. Not only was Merrihew staying out of sight, there was little point in accusing him of kidnapping Constance. All traces of her presence in DeHaven House would be gone, and there would be no one there except a skeleton crew getting things ready for the opening of the facility in a few weeks. She had not seen anyone clearly, no license number, nothing tangible. Charlie had noted the license plates; he always did notice things like that, but that didn't mean a thing. She had not seen them. These were stated reasons for letting that issue go. The unstated reason, one they both understood well, was that Charlie considered this a private affair.

Charlie had said, "How do you satisfy the kidnapper's demands when the kidnappee is sitting by your side? Damned if I know the answer.

"Besides," Charlie said after the waiter came to clear the table and discreetly leave a tab, "you can't just walk in on a doctor and demand answers to your questions."

"I'll make a few calls," she said. "People I know in Philadelphia. Someone may know her, or know someone who does."

He did not argue. She had a network that was enviable; she knew people all over the country, and the fact that she did peer reviews, and also published reviews of books on psychology, as well as publishing her own books, did not hurt a thing. Her network had paid off more than once over the years.

Debra Merrihew was a pediatrician, married to Alfred Finelly, an orthopedic surgeon. Nothing unusual about that, a mutual friend of hers and Constance's had said on the phone, except that Al's practice was in Los Angeles, and Debra's in Philadelphia. They saw each other on holidays and vacations, she had said a bit cattily, and that kept the marriage stable. There were three grown children.

At ten minutes before six on Monday, Constance and Charlie were in a dim bar waiting for Debra Merrihew Finelly, who had agreed to see them after office hours. She was late.

"At six I'm out of here," Charlie said grumpily. Perfectly at home in New York City traffic, he had found Philadelphia impossible to navigate at that time of day, and they had ended up parking the car in a lot and taking a cab to the bar.

Constance smiled at him and sipped Chardonnay. "I think she just came in," she said, nodding toward the entrance. A woman had entered, paused in the dim light, squinting.

Debra Merrihew Finelly was sixty-one, and at the moment she looked it, solid like her brother, and not fat. She had iron-gray hair, was dressed in a rumpled skirt suit and low shoes. She saw Constance and approached the table.

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"Constance Leidl?"

Constance stood up and took her hand as Charlie pulled out a chair for her. "Dr. Merrihew? Or is it Dr. Finelly?"

She introduced Charlie and they seated themselves.

"Merrihew," Debra said. She held up her hand for the waiter. "Jack Daniels on the rocks, and a glass of water. Followed by a double burger, medium rare, and fries. Pronto!" Then to Constance she said, "I've had a hell of a day."

"I'm grateful that you could see us," Constance said.

"Two people I know and respect said I should," Debra said. "Seems people owe you, and I'm part of the payback. Way the game works. What do you want?"

"To talk about your brother."

"He's a louse, a heel, evil, wicked, bad news, dangerous, not to be crossed. Next topic?" She grinned, not to take the charge from her words, apparently, but to ease the sudden tension that had emerged. "Sorry. See, I put a kid in the hospital at five after five, temp one oh five, no diagnosis yet. Ordered a bunch of tests and they'll start coming in in about—" she looked at her watch—"an hour or a little more, and I have to be there when they do. I don't have a lot of time to discuss brother Jason. Cut to the chase, that's the order of the day."

"Good enough," Constance said. "Does he have long-standing enemies? People who would like to see him ruined? And know enough about him to see that it happens?"

"Enemies, sure. They'd like to see him six feet under. Nobody knows what makes him tick. Including me. Next?"

The waiter brought her drink and she gulped down half of it, then drew in a breath. "Needed that. Why are you asking about him?"

"Last week he had hoodlums kidnap me in order to coerce Charlie into investigating deaths at a work site that apparently means a great deal to him. We want to know more about him before we decide what to do about it."

Debra nodded. "That sounds like his style. His terraces? I read about them and the accidents. The only thing he's cared about since he was a kid. He's trying to expiate his sins or something. Not my field, but it figures."

"What do you mean?"

Debra looked at her watch. "Our father died in an accident that shouldn't have happened. A trapdoor opened and let a ton or more of grain fall on him, smothered him. He was a bully and a tyrant all around, but that was over the top. Jason swore that the trap was secure the last time he checked. Afterward, he made our mother give him some money and he took off for South America—we both thought for good—but he came back, and he began to run things his way. He terrorized her exactly the way our father had

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done. Fourteen years ago, when she died, he came for the funeral, the first time he had been around for more than twenty years. We both said some pretty nasty things, and he slapped me hard. I yelled that he should look in the mirror, and he'd see our father looking back. He ran out and I haven't seen him or heard from him since. But what I said was true. He's turned into the father he hated and feared, and possibly killed. That day, fourteen years ago, he looked like him, talked like him, and acted like him. It spooked me, seeing Father in the house on the day we buried my mother." She finished her Jack Daniels and sipped some water. "Do you suppose they had to go slaughter a cow to make my hamburger?" She looked at her watch again.

"He was married, wasn't he?" Constance asked after a moment.

"Twice. The first time was a love match, but she died in an accident six months after they were married. If it had lasted, he might have changed, turned human. He was twenty-five, time enough to change his stripes if things had gone well." She shrugged. "Anyway, they were hiking at Child's Park in Pennsylvania, and Lorna fell off a cliff. He was at the bottom with some other people in the group and saw it happen, and that warped him more than he already was. Sent him off his own cliff, so to speak. He swore someone pushed her, but there wasn't anyone else up there. Guys in the group were taking pictures of her posing on the cliff. She was alone. He's been plagued by accidents, hasn't he? The second time, God only knows why they got married. She stayed a few years, took him to the cleaners, and got out. I was surprised that it lasted as long as it did, frankly. Four, five years. Then he started his goddamn terraces, and no woman or anything else has interested him since. He resented having to attend our mother's funeral, in fact—part of the reason we had a fight."

The waiter brought her a platter with a huge hamburger and a mountain of fries. "Double espresso coffee," she said, and tore into the hamburger.

She talked a little more as she ate, sometimes with a mouthful, sometimes between bites, and she kept an eye on her watch. "God, I hope it isn't meningitis," she said in the middle of something else. "He's only five." She looked at her watch again. "Sorry." She finished the coffee, then reached for her purse. "Hate to eat and run, but—"

"Thanks," Constance said. "I hope the little fellow is okay." She was not certain that the doctor heard her as she rushed away.

Constance drove after they retrieved their car from the lot. Charlie grumped that he was perfectly capable of getting them out of the city, and she agreed, then added, "But if you do it, I'll have to sit and listen to you bitch, and I'd rather not. Now, first a restaurant, then a motel. Right?"

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He scowled, but nodded, and actually was relieved. "It's the one-way streets," he said. "Why do they always go the wrong way?"

"Because," she explained.

He laughed, put his hand on her thigh, and let her drive.

Later, in a motel, with carry-out coffee at hand, she said, "Do you remember our deal when I first started aikido lessons?"

His expression became guarded. "I didn't realize that we made a deal."

"We most certainly did. You said that if anyone ever hurt me I'd better take care of him myself. Now, Merrihew didn't actually hurt me. In fact, they were excessively careful, and I hurt myself in the forest, but no matter, theoretically it was his fault. But that was our deal and I insist that you stick to it and let me take care of him."

Her words were light, but her eyes were like pale blue ice. When she was like this he thought of the Snow Queen, implacable and remote, also beyond reason. He crossed the room to get his coffee.

"Charlie! I mean it. I'll take care of him my way. Sit down, we have to talk."

It was nearly five o'clock when they pulled into the driveway the following day. The cats met them with a clamor when they entered the house. Charlie yelled, "Honey, I'm home!" Constance rolled her eyes and walked ahead of him to the kitchen, shooing cats away effortlessly as she went. She had a bag of groceries that she started to unload. Charlie followed, and put down another bag. Five minutes later the phone rang. He picked it up and said, "Meiklejohn."

A cool, crisp female voice said, "Mr. Meiklejohn, you are to go to Fall Creek, and from there—"

"Honey, tell Merrihew to call me," he said, and hung up. He started to unload the second bag. A minute later the phone rang again. It was the same cool voice. "Mr. Meiklejohn, I have a message—"

"Merrihew," he said, and hung up again. The next time it rang he and Constance listened to her without answering. He found the bourbon he had been searching for and took two glasses from the cabinet. He had to do his cat dance around the beasts, who were clustering around Constance telling her all about their woes in loud, raucous voices. The next time the phone rang Merrihew's voice came on the answering machine.

Charlie picked up the phone and said, "Merrihew, I'll expect you at two in the afternoon tomorrow. I have answers for you. Bring a cashier's check for twenty-five thousand." He hung up. Unhurriedly he returned to the foyer, found the listening device under the table, and brought it back with him, continued past Constance, who had not made a sound, took it outside and stepped on

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it, crushing it thoroughly. "Now, that drink," he said. "Water? Soda water? Straight?"

The telephone rang. Merrihew's voice was thick with fury. "Meiklejohn, I want to talk to you!" Charlie broke the connection, turned the ringer off, and muted the machine.

"Water," Constance said.

At five minutes after two the following day Charlie watched a black limousine pull into his driveway, stop, and three men emerge. Merrihew was dressed as befitting a multimillionaire this time, and one of the men was equally well dressed. The third one was thick, heavy, and too ugly to be entirely human, Charlie decided. He opened the door when the bell chimed.

"Merrihew is an invited guest," he said equably. "You two can wait in the car."

"This is preposterous," Merrihew said. "Stanley Loren is my attorney. He comes in with me. And my driver comes in, too."

Charlie pulled his revolver from his pocket. "In this county I have many friends, and a great deal of respect, too much, possibly. If I shoot trespassers, thugs who try to force their way into my house, I believe I would have a lot of sympathy from those friends, especially in light of the fact that my wife was kidnapped and forcibly detained just a few days ago."

For a moment no one moved. Then the driver nudged the attorney aside and moved forward. Charlie raised the gun and he stopped.

"For God's sake!" Merrihew snapped. "Wait in the car." He took a step and Charlie shook his head.

"We'll wait until they get back to the car," he said. He watched the other two all the way back to the limousine, while they got inside and closed the doors, before he opened his own door wider and stepped aside to admit Merrihew.

He walked ahead of him to the living room and motioned to the green chair that Merrihew had sat in before. He stood at the fireplace, where a feeble fire was burning. "Put the check on the table by your side," he said.

"You're insane. I want to know what I'm buying first."

Charlie pulled two tiny tape recorders from his pocket and put one on the table by Merrihew, the other one on the mantel at the fireplace. "One for you, one for me," he said. "They've both been turned on from the time I opened the door. Today is April sixth, two-ten in the afternoon. Merrihew, you said I push the envelope. Maybe I do. Also, I take charge. We do this my way or get out. The check on the table."

Merrihew's face had been red, not from wind that day since there was little. It turned a deeper red as he struggled, started to rise, slumped again, and finally pulled a check from his inside

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breast pocket and slapped it on the table.

"I don't know what you're talking about, a kidnapping or anything else," he said. "I hired you to find out who was responsible for the deaths at my work site, nothing more."

"You will keep your mouth shut or beat it," Charlie said. "My wife wandered all around DeHaven House before she walked away, and she deliberately left fingerprints in unusual places." That was his only lie, but he thought it sounded pretty good. "The only way you can eradicate her presence there is if you burn down the whole dump. With this conversation on tape, an arson fire at DeHaven House would in itself be as good as an admission of guilt. The license numbers of the van and the motorcycle are in my possession." He recited them both. "They can easily be traced back to you."

He shrugged. "Maybe with high-priced lawyers you could beat the rap eventually, but it would take time, years possibly, because I would be persistent in my charges. And since workers are pretty spooked about working on the terraces, it's also possible that it would come to a standstill while you're involved in a legal tangle."

"This is extortion," Merrihew said in a harsh voice. "What are you after? What do you want?" At that moment Constance strolled into the room, dressed exactly the way she had been on his first visit, in a pale blue sweater, black pants, running shoes.

Merrihew made a strangled sound in his throat as she seated herself in the wing chair and regarded him calmly. "You suspected a deadly enemy from the start," she said. "You were right. There is such an enemy and he has no intention of allowing you to finish the terraces. Who killed Lorna, Mr. Merrihew?"

He gave a violent start, started to rise, then fell back into the chair, watching her as if hypnotized. "It was an accident," he whispered.

"So they decided. People were taking pictures of her on the cliff and no one saw another person up there. No one else was in the pictures that were taken. But you saw him, didn't you? You knew. When you look into the mirror, Mr. Merrihew, who looks back at you? Your sister saw him, didn't she? Then the message was sent and you received it just fine. A man killed in an avalanche of dirt, another in a fall. Just like your father, asphyxiated under an avalanche of grain, and your wife, killed in a fall. You understood the message perfectly well, didn't you? And you started to keep watch. To protect the workers? To keep your enemy away from them? Or, more likely, to make certain the terraces moved ahead in spite of his efforts. But he prevailed time after time, and you didn't see a thing, did you? In fact, aren't there short periods when your memory fails, when you have blank spots? You suspected Alzheimer's, or said you did, but those aren't the symptoms, Mr. Merrihew. Your memory failed when there was a fatal accident near you. Your enemy was responsible for those deaths, and he

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will keep causing them as long as the project continues and you are nearby. He wants you to understand that he is doing it. He does not intend for you to complete the terraces and achieve the satisfaction you yearn for. He has decided you don't deserve it."

She was speaking in a conversational tone, cool and reflective, regarding him steadily as she talked. And he continued to watch her as if entranced. "Who did you see on the cliff by Lorna?" she asked then, not changing her tone at all.

"My father," he whispered. *"I saw him."* He shook himself abruptly, then said in a rasping voice, "It was an accident! Everyone knows it was an accident! The trapdoor was secure when I checked it!"

Constance stood up and walked from the room, and Merrihew turned toward Charlie. "It was an accident," he said in a choked voice. He looked as if he had aged ten years since entering the house.

Charlie shrugged. "I suggest that you set up a corporation or something, turn over enough assets to complete the terraces, rename them, and bow out all the way. Stay away from that site. Call them the Fall Creek Terraces, or the New Inca Terraces, anything else, and keep the hell away from there."

Merrihew didn't move for a moment, then he jerked up from the chair unsteadily and regarded the tape recorder at hand with abhorrence. He picked it up and threw it as hard as he could into the fire. He walked like a very old man as he went toward the foyer and the front door without another word. He didn't give a glance at the check on the table.

Constance joined Charlie at the window. He put his arm around her shoulders and together they watched Merrihew make his way to the limousine, get inside, and leave in it.

Charlie was thinking of the conversation they had had in the motel two nights before. "You have to break him," she had said. "Take charge and keep it, disorient him. You saw the kind of control he has, not a twitch, not a flicker of his eye, as still as a statue. We have to get through that barrier for it to work, and you can do it." When he protested that it was pointless, Merrihew was a killer and a kidnapper, and they couldn't prove a thing against him, she had said, "He knows and he has to admit to himself that he knows. Let me take care of him my way, Charlie. The terraces are all he has to live for." And today they had watched a defeated man leave their house.

At the window, when the limousine had vanished from sight, he squeezed her shoulder and murmured, "He's his own worst enemy." And, he thought, she scared the bejesus out of him at times.

She looked at him with bright interest. "But you don't have a guilty conscience."

And that was the scariest thing of all, he added to himself. ●

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And If He Sees His Shadow

by Jeremiah Healy

I parked my aging Honda Prelude on a side street, and while the six-paneled wooden door in the slumping brick building displayed the right address, I had a feeling that the insurance agency probably fronted on the main drag. Turning the corner, I could see tarnished chrome handles standing out from two glass doors, the words THOMAS G. FLAHERTY—INSURANCE—ALL KINDS emblazoned in peeling silver letters at eye level. I took a breath and pulled on the closer handle.

A string of sleigh bells rang out. We were a lot closer to Easter than Christmas, though, so I assumed the low-tech warning system was a year-round thing.

Inside the doors were clear glass partitions, what seemed a secretarial or clerical area to the right, a more executive office to the left. The wood paneling on the wall was separating at the ceiling, and the only light at seven P.M. came from one of those green-shaded, fluorescent desk lamps everybody had when I first entered insurance investigation after Vietnam.

Tommy Flaherty rose from behind the desk and lamp. If I hadn't known this was his place of business, I'd have been hard pressed to recognize him.

When Tommy had worked as a claims investigator for me at

Jeremiah Healy, author of 13 novels featuring the protagonist of this story, John Francis Cuddy, also writes legal thrillers under his pseudonym Terry Devane. The third and latest Devane novel, *A Stain Upon the Robe,* features attorneys Mairead O'Clare and Sheldon Gold as they become involved in Boston's priest-rape crisis. The book has been optioned by Flatiron Films, and "Terry"/Jerry will be the American Guest of Honour at the 2004 Toronto Bouchercon.

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Empire Insurance, he'd been slim with a full head of wavy Black-Irish hair and a certain flair for fashion and humor. The man who came around the desk tried for the old smile, but there was no spark to it, and the weight he'd added and the hair he'd lost couldn't save the stained business shirt and poorly knotted tie.

"Hey, John Francis Cuddy," Tommy said, a damp right hand pumping mine. Concave steel splints kept his left ring finger straight. "Jeez, it's good to see you."

"Same, Tommy."

"Sit, sit." He waved me to a client chair, padded with good leather once, but either so old or so neglected that little puffs of white stuffing oozed from cracks in the seat cushion. Tommy brought a bottle of Jim Beam out of his bottom desk drawer, two short glasses already resting on some papers in front of him.

One of the glasses looked as though it had been there awhile already. "Just a splash for me, Tommy."

"Aw, come on, John. We haven't seen each other in how many years?"

I didn't want to tally them. "Tommy—"

"Hey," he said, pouring liberally into both glasses, an ounce or so more for the one closer to him. "You heard the joke about the three seminarians?"

Tommy, Tommy. "Will it get us closer to why you wanted to see me?"

"Spirit of the season, John. Spirit of the season." His right hand shook a little as he passed my glass across the desk. "The head of this seminary's worried that his place is turning out incompetent priests, right? So, the monsignor decides to call the three students at the bottom of the class into his office, give each one a pop quiz."

Tommy gulped some of his bourbon without offering a toast. I sipped mine, the burn feeling pretty good.

As though it wouldn't be a totally wasted evening with a former coworker on what looked to be the downslope of his life.

"Well," Tommy putting down his glass, "the guy gets the first kid into his office and says, 'All right, my son, what is Easter?' And the kid, surprised, replies, 'Why, Monsignor, Easter is that holiday in the early winter when we decorate pine trees and exchange gifts.' The monsignor goes, 'No, you idiot! Pack your bags and get out.'"

Tommy coughed a little, taking another gulp of bourbon like it was offered water. "So the guy gets the second kid into his office, and asks the same question, and this kid, also surprised, says, 'Why, Monsignor, Easter is that holiday in the midsummer when we have picnics and shoot off fireworks.' And the monsignor—getting kind of pissed now that his suspicions are being confirmed—says, 'No, you idiot! Pack your bags and get out.'"

Seeing a certain pattern developing, I said, "Tommy—"

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"—So the guy calls in the third seminarian, and asks him the question. And this kid, seeming kind of disappointed, says, 'Why, Monsignor, Easter is that holiday in the early spring when we celebrate Christ being crucified and taken down from the cross . . .' And the head of the seminary's starting to think things maybe aren't so hopeless after all as the kid goes on to say, '. . . and He's buried, and on the third day He arises from the dead to walk out of His tomb . . .' And just as the monsignor's about to tell the kid he can return to his studies, the third seminarian finishes by saying, '. . . And if He sees His shadow, He goes back in, and we have six more weeks of winter.' "

Tommy Flaherty laughed so hard I thought he'd need a Heimlich maneuver, which I wasn't sure worked on bourbon.

"Well, John," around a choking sound, "what do you think?"

"Good one, Tommy. Now what do you need me for?"

The choking, and the laughing, stopped pretty much at the same time. "Ah, the truth is, I've got kind of a problem."

"What kind, Tommy?"

"You stayed up on the insurance industry after you left Empire?"

The company had made all of us get private investigator licenses while we worked there. I'd opened up my own shop, and did occasional insurance-claims work, even a few cases for Empire itself. "Some."

"Well, I have to tell you, John, I got sick of it. Not that you didn't train us all real good. Hell, I never felt more . . . professional than when I worked for you back there. Only thing was, I never made any money at it, and so when this uncle of mine wanted to retire to Florida, I took over his agency here."

I thought I knew what was coming next. "Bad timing."

"Huh, tell me about it. First, I got eaten alive by all the companies offering their employees health insurance during the boom times. Then I couldn't get the poor slobs covered once they were laid off in the recession. The big agencies are all doing radio and TV advertising for the auto-liability market, and John, I can't compete with them on discounts."

"Which leaves you . . . ?"

" . . . the life and homeowners policies, but now most of the working stiffs get some kind of group life coverage through the job with premiums that I also can't touch. And a lot of mortgage banks now dictate what kind of homeowners, 'oh, and by the way, we offer it for just a little money and a check mark in that box on the form.' So, what was I supposed to do?"

Uh-oh. "You borrowed from your accounts?"

"Worse." Tommy tossed off the rest of his drink. "I borrowed from a shark."

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Swell. "Somebody you knew beforehand?"

"Uh-unh. Got a . . . referral, like."

"Let me guess. You're not keeping up with the payment schedule."

"Keeping *up?"* Tommy tried to laugh, but it didn't quite come off, so he poured himself another few ounces of bourbon. "John, the weekly vig amounts to fifty percent of my weekly take."

The interest, or "vigorish," on whatever he'd borrowed. "Are you covering at least the vig, though?"

"Most weeks, yes." Tommy held up his left hand, waggled it in a way that caused a wave of pain to cross his facial features. "Last week, no."

"The shark broke your finger."

"Not Tedesco himself. It was this half-colored enforcer he's got, wears his hair like an Afro, probably trying to get in touch with his 'darker' side."

"Tommy?"

"Yeah?"

"Another racial slur, and you'll be talking to yourself here."

"Aw, jeez, John. I'm sorry, I forgot how you were about that kind of—"

"Tommy, what do you think I can do for you?"

He breathed out deeply, a little foulness reaching me even four feet away. "You know why DuPage—the enforcer—broke this finger?"

"Seems pretty clear. Start small, work his way up the—"

"No, John. I mean *this* finger." Tommy held up his left hand again, pointing with the index finger on his right to the splinted one. "He was sending me a message. Break the finger with the wedding band on it, guess what he breaks next?"

"Another husband part."

"Or the 'wife part.' " Tommy's eyes began to fill. "You never met Hildy, I don't think."

Hard for me to say. When my wife, Beth, died from her cancer, a lot of the Empire people paid their respects, but I wasn't exactly focusing on them, and it was long enough ago any—

"John?"

"Sorry, Tommy."

"I was getting a little worried about you there."

"I'm okay. And no, I don't think I ever met Hildy."

Tommy blinked away a tear. "She's the kind of woman, a guy like DuPage gets a look at her, he'd—"

A knock on the glass doors. Tommy jumped in the swivel chair and lurched behind him toward a floor safe, the kind you'd see in an old Wells Fargo office. I looked toward the front of the building.

A couple, maybe Latinos, middle-aged and dressed for church,

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were peering in, their expressions showing uncertainty.

I turned back and saw Tommy sliding something with a walnut butt into the safe.

"Jesus, Tommy. You still have a permit for that?"

"Kept it up after I left Empire. Smith & Wesson revolver." He almost seemed relieved by who was knocking. "Clientele I got, there's always cash coming in to pay last month's premium. Or the month's before that." Tommy wiped his hands on his thighs and squirreled away the liquor bottle. "Look, John, I need to try and sell these people a homeowners' policy. How's about you go upstairs, talk to Hildy awhile?"

"Tommy, I—"

"No more than ten, fifteen minutes. Swear." Then, in a lower voice. "Please?"

If I were in his position . . . "Okay. She know who I am, at least?"

"Yeah," said Tommy. "I told her you were coming by, and you can use that door there, goes right up to our apartment."

As I opened the interior door, some light from the stairway tumbled out and across my face. I turned to close the door behind me, Tommy sprinkling some Spanish words into his greeting for the couple he was ushering back to his desk. I could see my silhouette from the waist up fall across the wall over his safe, and I wondered how many more weeks of winter Tommy Flaherty would be facing.

"Be a dear and hand me those Players, would you?"

I reached over to the kitchen counter from my aluminum-and-acrylic chair and picked up a distinctive teal-and-white pack of what felt like cigarettes, especially since a Bic lighter rested next to it. A portrait of an old-time sailor appeared on the cardboard with a "NAVY CUT" caption beneath the face, and the word "Légère" in the lower right-hand corner of the pack.

"You could toss them to me," said Hildy Flaherty from the other side of the Formica table, "but it would be ever so much nicer if you brought one over and lit it."

I hadn't been real comfortable entering her kitchen from the stairway. Partly it was that she held a cordless hair dryer the size of a ray gun in her right hand, but mostly it was that Hildy'd remained in her robe—a padded-shoulder, belted model—while receiving her husband's guest. And she had an array of small photos in front of her, all with the same blue background, like an eyewitness scanning mug shots.

"I'm still waiting for that cigarette."

Hildy watched me as she moved the snout of the nearly silent dryer down her long, curly hair, the left hand raking behind it like Harpo Marx over his strings. The hair was dishwater blond, the

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eyes a green I couldn't put a shade-name to. Heavy breasts pressed with enough definition against the fabric of the robe to tell me that Hildy wasn't wearing anything underneath, and when she crossed her legs, I made sure my eyes stayed on her face.

Which seemed to make the woman smirk. "God, what *does* a girl have to do to get a . . . light from you?"

I slid the pack and the Bic over the Formica to her. "I don't believe in contributing to other people's bad habits."

"You Americans," said Hildy, a sexual heaviness from her bust—or her butts—melding into her voice. "Always the world's . . . chaperones."

More smirk on that last word.

I said, "Canadian?"

"You got that from the cigarettes?" she said, bringing one to life.

"No."

"That French word—'légère'?—means 'light.'"

"Just your accent."

Confused now behind a cloud of smoke. "You could tell I'm from Toronto?"

It came out "Trannah." I said, "Your lack of accent, really, sounding American except for the 'you Americans' part."

Setting the Bic and the pack on the table, Hildy leaned forward, the lapels of the robe bowing in a way that suggested she was aware of it without having to look down at them. Then she passed her free hand over the photos. "Pick your favorite."

"They're upside down to me."

"Which can be interesting, in and of itself."

When I didn't pick up on that, Hildy made a ceremony out of turning each photo around so I could see them all. Seven head-and-shoulder shots of her—identical shots, actually, except that one captured her current hairdo while the others had slightly blurry versions of radically different styles.

Hildy said, "My salon can do that with this new computer-camera they have. It really shows you a lot of choices."

"Sometimes too many options can be a burden."

Hildy cocked her head, then pointed to a photo with the hair cut to maybe two inches all around and permed. "I like this one, but I really do care which you'd choose. I think you're way more clever than poor Tommy."

I felt a sudden need to defend him. "He was a good investigator for me."

"Yeah, well," Hildy, rolling her shoulders like she'd just awakened, "he's a lousy salesman for me. I mean, look at this place, would you?"

"We all do what we can."

Hildy sent out a plume of smoke through her nostrils. "Tommy doesn't 'do' enough. Spends all his time on this broken-down

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agency, seeing his 'prospects' at night—which is a pretty good word for them, 'prospects.' Like he's panning for gold by a stream in the Yukon. Only Tommy swirls through a ton of dirty sand for every nugget he finds, and even that's not enough."

I wasn't sure how much of Tommy's loan-shark troubles he'd shared with his wife, including the implied threat to her, so I moved to safer ground. "You work yourself?"

A shake of the head, which seemed to remind Hildy to continue drying her long hair. "Too complicated, work permits or green cards or whatever your government requires."

Didn't sound like she'd explored things very deeply. "You help Tommy down in the office, then?"

A grunt that I took to be a disgusted laugh. "You see all those desks opposite his?"

"I did."

"Papers piled on them, telephones and so forth. But why would you suppose he has the 'prospects' come in at night?"

"Because they *do* have jobs during the day?"

"Oh, John, a dig nicely done." Hildy made her hair shimmer like a waterfall under the dim light of the overhead fixture. "But clever as your reply might be, you're only partly right. The *real* reason poor Tommy has the bloody beggars come in at night is so they can't see that he can't afford any girls down there to help him during the day."

I closed my eyes just a moment before opening them again. "He's on his own."

"Yes. Oh, I do help him when I can, though. Like with his loan."

Steady, boy. "His . . . loan?"

"Yes. The pinhead was owing his 'carriers' or whatever those companies are called, and so he had to borrow. Only no self-respecting banker would ever lend on this decrepit operation, so Tommy needed a deep pocket less . . . discerning."

Hildy Flaherty had enjoyed some education above the border, but knowledge and wisdom didn't always come packaged together. "And you found that pocket for him."

"Let's just say a friend of mine did."

Which made her friend Tommy's referral. "Who?"

"I'm afraid my lips are sealed. Confidentiality and all that."

I was about to say something I'd probably have regretted when Tommy poked his head through the kitchen doorway. He grinned at his wife, then said, "John, you can come back down now."

Hildy swung her hair around slowly. "You sell those people?"

"Not tonight, but they'll be back."

"Yeah, right," said Hildy Flaherty, going for another cigarette. "On the twelfth of never."

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"So, John," said Tommy from his chair across the desk. "What'd you think of Hildy?"

"Attractive woman. Weighs her options before choosing one, too."

"Weighs . . . ? Oh, you mean the hairstyle thing. Yeah, she's got an appointment tomorrow afternoon. Likes to look good for going out at night with her friends."

"Her friends?" was past my mouth before I could yank it back.

"Yeah," Tommy now rallying to defend his wife to me. "I'm stuck here most nights seeing customers or prospects, but that's no reason Hildy shouldn't enjoy her life some, is it?"

"No." I shifted in my chair. "Tommy, back to this shark?"

"Tedesco. Lou Tedesco. He works out of a bar off Dot Ave."

Dorchester Avenue. "Just what do you think I can do for you?"

Tommy's eyes got bright for a moment, maybe seeing he could close some sort of sale that night. "Go talk with him for me. Show the guy I've got some solid people on my side."

"Why would this Tedesco care about that, Tommy?"

"I don't know if he would, but jeez, John, do I have a choice? I mean, I hear these guys got guns, big ones."

I thought about Tommy's wife and her "choices." And about the other choices he'd already made. "I'll give it a try."

Then I got out of there as Tommy Flaherty thanked me and just before he could start crying or resume drinking.

The wind was coming off the water and up her hillside, but it had lost most of its punch by the time it reached the row of granite stones in front of me. I stopped at Beth's.

John, good to see you.

"And you."

Any plans for Easter?

Beth and I used to have a big feast with an Italian-American family we'd grown up near in South Boston. But most of that clan had passed on, and many of the rest had moved on.

John?

"Sorry. I've got a case that's making me zone out a little."

How so?

Watching the gulls wheel and scream by the shoreline, I went over it for her. Tommy, his wife, his debt problems.

A hesitation. Then, *What are you going to do?*

"Talk to the police, talk to the shark."

Toward offering him what?

I came back to her stone. "That's the part I haven't worked out yet."

As the waitress served Sergeant Detective Marilyn Alongi her coffee, I reached for the tab. Leaving a five to cover my hot chocolate

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as well, I said, "Thanks for agreeing to this on such short notice."

Alongi—fiftyish, trim, and studiously attractive—looked over the rim of the thick porcelain cup, standard diner-issue. "Lieutenant Murphy in Homicide vouched for you, kind of."

"We've known each other a long time."

"Murphy said, 'Cuddy's a Boy Scout, but the only thing he knows how to tie in knots is his own—' "

"I get the picture."

Alongi gave me a nice smile as she lowered her coffee back to its saucer. "So, you're wired into Homicide at headquarters, what do you need an area detective for?"

"Her 'area.' Specifically, a certain bar."

"Being?"

I named it for her. Alongi leaned back in the booth. "Let me bet a long shot here. Lou Tedesco."

"You should play the lottery."

"I do, but Tedesco's a little easier to predict. He muscling one of your friends?"

"Through a valued associate."

"DuPage." Alongi nodded to herself. "He must have a second name, but I've never heard anybody use it. And I don't know about the 'valued' part."

A first ray of hope. "What do you mean?"

"Word on the street is master and pit bull aren't getting along too well."

"Reason?"

"Don't know. So far as I can tell, their operation runs pretty smoothly, which probably means pretty profitably, too."

"Is Tedesco connected?"

Alongi grew a little straighter on her bench seat. "You asking me that because of his last name or mine?"

"Both."

A hint of smile again as she took more coffee. "Murphy said you were frank to a fault."

I waited.

Alongi gestured with her cup. "To save you having to repeat your question, no, Tedesco's an independent. After the Angiulo Brothers went down in that FBI mega-case, things got kind of loosey-goosey in their old spheres of influence. Lou sensed a niche and filled it."

"You know them to use violence?"

"What, Tedesco and DuPage?"

"Our current topic of conversation."

"Tedesco, no. Oh, he might belt some poor guy while DuPage pinned the pigeon's arms, but Lou fancies himself more the managerial type. DuPage, now, is a different story. Mostly his hands, but word also has it that if he were to open that trenchcoat he

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always seems to be wearing, you might see an Intratec Tec-9 hanging from a strap."

Semiautomatic nine-millimeter, thirty-some rounds and nearly as big as Hildy Flaherty's hair dryer. Which made me think of her husband's finger, and also gave me an idea. "You ever collar these goons?"

"No. Never caught them dirty on the sharking or the weapons stuff."

I thought over what Alongi had told me. "Without an arrest, it seems kind of odd that you'd know Tedesco by his first name but not DuPage."

She slid out from her side of the booth. "Not so odd, since Lou and I went through high school together."

"Oh," I said.

Rising from the bench seat and smoothing down her skirt, Sergeant Detective Marilyn Alongi looked at our tabletop. "Be sure to drink your Ovaltine, now, you want to grow up like Captain Midnight."

It took me a day to get the supplies I wanted from both a medical supply house and a friendly firearms dealer, so it wasn't till the following evening that I entered the bar Tommy Flaherty had given me as Tedesco's place of business. If the ceiling had been higher, and the furniture better, you'd might have thought you'd been transported to the lobby of the United Nations.

A black jazz group was gamely trying to play dance music in a corner, Caribbean-American from the accent of the lead singer. Some Cambodian faces sat as far across the room as possible from some Vietnamese ones. Several conversations in what I took for Arabic were flourishing at the bar, and another I knew to be Spanish bubbled up from behind me. A couple of patrons glanced at my right hand, some even making way for me as I edged to the closest tender.

His face and accent suggested Pakistani as he asked if he could help me.

"I'm looking for Lou Tedesco."

Neither the face nor the accent changed, but a little catch caused his next two words to stumble a mite. "He is . . . not a man I know, sir."

"You know DuPage?"

"Sir, I can provide you a drink, or—"

"—I can ask each of your customers if *they* know my friends. How would that be for business, do you suppose?"

A resigned tone now. "You are police?"

"If I were, could you have pushed me this far?"

The keep nodded, then pointed to a stool while his other hand picked up a phone from below the bar.

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❖ ❖ ❖

You saw him on the street, you'd give him a wide berth, because he'd perfected the walk.

A man in a modest Afro, with barely tinted skin and a belted trenchcoat, came out from a narrow hallway in the back. His hips rolled in a cock-of-the-roost way, his strides more like struts. As he saw me, there was no recognition in his face, but he unbuckled the belt of his coat anyway.

When the man drew even with me, I waited till he opened his mouth before jumping in first. "You wear that thing inside, too?"

DuPage just eyed me, a tiger shark's stare from a loan shark's muscle. "The hell are you to care, Slick?"

"John Francis," I said, using a slight alias. "And I'd like to see Mr. Tedesco."

"And why would that be?"

"How's about we all three go over that together?" DuPage signaled to the bartender, just an ambiguous wave, but the keep picked up the phone again.

"Okay, Slick. Hold it right there."

We'd gotten about two-thirds of the way down the narrow corridor in the back of the bar. I was about to speak when DuPage followed up with, "You play patty-cake with that wall."

He spread-eagled me against the crumbly plaster, frisking me efficiently. I wasn't wearing a gun, and I'd taken my investigator ID out of my pocket as well. DuPage was even polite enough to let my right hand alone.

After finishing, he nudged me along the corridor till we reached the door at its end. He knocked in a staccato code, then opened it and waved me over the threshold.

The office had probably been a storeroom at one time, given the heating and venting ducts running overhead and the concrete floor echoing a little beneath my heels. The desk looked even worse than Tommy Flaherty's, and I had the feeling the man behind it wasn't heavily into appearances.

Lou Tedesco was strong through the neck and shoulders, like he might have done some football or weightlifting, but the pleasures of conspicuous consumption had taken their toll via the jowls and wattles hanging over an open-collared sport shirt. His fingers were pudgy, too, and I guessed the three rings on his left hand hadn't ventured over their knuckles since a good fifty pounds ago.

Without rising, Tedesco said, "You wanted to talk to me, so talk."

There was a chair too shabby for the lounge out front, and I sat in it. DuPage slid up against the wall, arms parting the trenchcoat and taking out cigarettes.

Distinctive pack, too. Teal-and-white cardboard.

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I spoke to Tedesco. "A friend of mine told me you might be able to help out with a loan."

A shrug that didn't come from ignorance. "You got friends, I got friends. Sometimes we do favors for our friends, am I right?"

"You loaned this particular friend some money, and he's having some trouble paying it back."

DuPage lit up, blowing his smoke out the corner of his mouth farther from me, so as not to blur his line of sight. Tedesco waved a hand in front of his face long before any smoke could have reached him.

Then Tedesco shrugged again. "This economy, it's tough for everybody."

"Except not every creditor breaks bones."

DuPage spit a bit of tobacco onto the floor. Tedesco frowned but didn't speak.

From the wall, the enforcer said, "That what somebody did to you, Slick?"

I raised my bandaged right hand gingerly, the gauze covering everything up to the wrist like a white boxing glove. "Burn, actually."

DuPage huffed out some more smoke. "Somebody be doing their collecting with fire now?"

"You moron," said Tedesco. "Who you ever hear collected using fire?"

DuPage bristled. "Was the reason I asked."

"Yeah, well, how's about next time you think first, huh?" Tedesco turned back to me. "Those cancer nails haven't destroyed what little brains you started the game with."

Marilyn Alongi had said all was not hearts and flowers between the two.

Tedesco stayed focused in my direction. "Look, the bartender, he tells me your name's 'John Francis.' Is that square?"

"Yes."

"Well, Mr. Francis, let me tell you something, then. All those people you saw out there in the lounge, how many of them you think a bank's gonna lend to, huh? I can tell you. Zero. Half of them are illegal, and the other half're running *from* something in their own country more than *to* something over here. But they're in the States now, so they need money to grease the wheels. I loan it to them, and these clients are grateful, refer me other business. They're so grateful, in fact, they pay their loans back to me, so my houseboy here don't have to go out cracking heads."

If DuPage bristled before, he nearly boiled over now. "I been telling you, Lou, you don't—"

"It's 'Mr. Tedesco,' we got business people in front of us. You don't show me no *re*spect, how you *ex*pect they gonna?"

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Tedesco did that last in street-black dialect. DuPage's nostrils were flared wide in a way that I didn't think had to do with the cigarette smoke now belching from them.

The fat man said, "How many times I got to give you a lesson before it sinks in?"

DuPage said, "Lessons, they something runs both ways."

Tedesco bit back his reply, then turned to me. "Mr. Francis, what I'm saying here is that I run a business, strictly business, so if your friend says—"

"Is it strictly business for DuPage here to refer you clients that he's sleeping with?"

A leap of faith, but the only card I had to play.

Lou Tedesco's face grew red. "What?"

Glancing up at his enforcer, I said, "Well, to be technical, DuPage is sleeping with your client's wife, but that's how you got the referral."

Tedesco's face turned toward DuPage as it veered toward purple. "You're hosing one of my—"

"Slick here don't know what he's talking about."

I said, "There another reason why you smoke her brand?"

"Say what?"

I pointed to the nearly-gone cigarette in his hand. "Players Light, from Canada."

Tedesco's voice had a grinding quality to it. "You sonofabitch, you just started smoking those wolf turds and told me—"

DuPage dropped his cigarette to the floor, mashing it out with the toe of his shoe. "I do what I want."

Tedesco screamed. "You stone-stupid half-breed, you don't stamp your butts out on my floor! I told you once, I told you a hundred times."

DuPage flapped open the right side of his trenchcoat, the belt flailing in the air. "I give you a hundred times of something."

The Tec-9 chattered through most of its clip, though thanks to the initial report inside the enclosed room, I didn't hear the slugs that followed. Tedesco shuddered in his chair like an urban cowboy riding a mechanical bull. Staying seated myself, I brought my right hand up slowly. When I gauged that DuPage realized he should save a few rounds to share with the eyewitness, the little derringer under my bandages hiccuped four times against my palm. DuPage slumped into the wall behind him before sliding down it, his torso trailing a smear of blood from a through-and-through wound.

Then I remembered to breathe again. That acrid smell of cordite filled my lungs with memories, none of them especially happy ones.

In the lounge, the three of us sat at the table the Cambodians had been using. Lieutenant Robert Murphy had his back to the office area, the medical examiner's people not yet having released the

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bodies from the crime scene. A gold pen nearly disappeared in Murphy's large black hand as he jotted notes on a little spiral pad such as a journalist might use. Sergeant Detective Marilyn Alongi didn't have to take any notes, since there wasn't any crime in her area beyond the killings themselves.

"Just so we have it straight," said Murphy, his pen coming up and tapping against his collar stay under a stylish tie, "you called me, I gave you Alongi, and you spoke to her before coming here, all over Tedesco and his sidekick muscling one of your friends."

"Right. Tommy Flaherty."

"And despite the fact that this friend of yours owed the late Lou some considerable bread, instead of just throwing you out on your ass, DuPage and Tedesco get into a name-calling contest with each other."

"The effect I have on some people."

Alongi said, "Lieutenant, I did tell Cuddy there was some kind of hassle brewing between the two of them. I just didn't know what."

Murphy hooded his eyes to slits. "And you, Cuddy, just had to stir the brew, huh?"

"I really wasn't involved in their give-and-take."

He reached down, came up with two Evidence baggies, each containing a firearm. "DuPage gave to Tedesco, and DuPage took from you."

The little derringer I'd bought didn't look like much next to the Tec-9. "A pepperbox, four twenty-two caliber hollow-points."

Alongi said, "They were enough."

"Look, folks, I didn't come here to kill anybody. I was just trying to help a friend."

The lieutenant closed up his pad. "Why don't we all pay a visit to your Mr. Flaherty, then."

I said, "Might want to call first."

Alongi said, "I tried twice. No answer."

As the three of us rose from our table, the M.E.'s people cleared the back corridor, wheeling a gurney holding a filled body bag, some bulk slopping over the edges.

Sergeant Detective Marilyn Alongi clucked her tongue off the roof of her mouth. "And to think, I nearly went to the prom with that guy."

"Looks pretty dark in there."

I said, "Lieutenant, he keeps it pretty dark."

Murphy turned to me, then spoke to Alongi. "Side door?"

"I knocked. No answer."

As Murphy said, "Batting a thousand," I thought I caught something move in the dim light inside, near Tommy's desk. Then I saw the movement again and identified it.

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"Lieutenant, there's somebody down in there."

"Where?"

I pointed. "Bare legs, rolling a little on the floor."

Alongi said, "Side door'd be easier to force."

Murphy said, "Let's hit it."

When we arrived at the door, I looked to Murphy, and he nodded. I cocked my right foot over the door knob and kicked out, just below the lock. The jamb splintered enough for me to shoulder through it.

"All right," said Murphy. "I'm in first, Alongi behind me. Cuddy, you wait till tomorrow. Got it?"

We both nodded as Alongi drew her Glock and Murphy unholstered his own.

I followed them, close enough to Alongi to touch her shoulder blades. Even without having smelled it within the hour, there was no mistaking the cordite pong still hanging in the air. The smell got stronger as we reached Tommy's office up front.

Dim light spilling from the doorway to the couple's second-floor apartment showed us an image I still can't shake.

Tommy Flaherty, on his knees, cradling Hildy's head in his lap and stroking her hair. He's keening softly, almost to himself. There are irregular blotches on her robe and flesh, like somebody's slapped a brush—saturated with red paint—four or five times against her. On the floor to Tommy's right lies his Smith & Wesson four-inch; on the floor to Hildy's left, her cordless hair dryer.

Since the revolver was within Tommy's reach, Murphy edged over to it, Alongi covering him. With his foot, the lieutenant slid the gun away like a soccer player in slow motion. Then Murphy let his own weapon slump down against the outside of his thigh.

He said, "What happened here?"

Tommy clenched his jaw, then managed, "I was over . . . by the safe . . . Closed a policy, putting the cash inside . . . A door opened, and I looked up, and it was DuPage, against the wall there."

My eyes went up above the safe. Jesus.

Tommy howled like a dog locked in a shed. "Only it wasn't DuPage, it was his shadow. . . . And after I turned with the revolver and fired, it wasn't even *his* shadow, jeez, it was Hildy's, with her robe like his coat—the belt and all—and her hair dryer like a machine gun, and . . . and . . . "

Tommy Flaherty just stroked the hair of his dead wife, the style fresh from the salon, her probably just wanting his take on it after shampooing. Only the style she'd chosen from among the photos I'd seen was the two-inch all-around perm.

A lot like an Afro, at least in silhouette.

Sergeant Detective Marilyn Alongi said, "Mother of God."

I thought, "And if he sees his shadow . . . " but kept it to myself. ●

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VALENTINO'S VALEDICTION

by Amy Myers

Until the Sheik galloped into her dreams, Ruby Smart had been happy enough with her husband Harold. After that, life at 12 The Cedars was never quite the same. A romp with Harold on Saturday night, however jolly, bore no comparison with Rudolph Valentino's dark smouldering eyes as he threw her across his horse, grating out: "Lie still, you little fool."

She could tell his voice was deep and sensuous, even though all you saw at the pictures was his lips moving and the words flashing up afterwards on the screen. The very thought of his being near her, bare-chested, nostrils flaring, made her shiver in anticipation. His hypnotic eyes seared right through her, doing odd things to her body.

She had been a little taken aback when she found out that they were doing the same odd things to Gladys Perkins, her chum at No. 16, but consoled herself that it was nice to have someone with whom she could pore over *Picturegoer*, dissect every sentence of Rudolph's autobiography, wallow in his book of poetry, swap photographs, and queue up at the Picturedrome when Harold refused to go. Which was all the time now. *And* he refused to wear sideboards like Rudolph, so how could he blame her for going with Gladys, even if it was three times a week?

Last year she and Gladys had actually seen Rudolph, when he came to London for the first night of *The Eagle*. She and Gladys had taken the train to Charing Cross and walked all the way to the Marble Arch Pavilion—they'd had to, because the traffic was

Much of author Amy Myers's work can be categorized as series historical mystery. Her best-known amateur detective, Auguste Didier, is an 1890s chef reluctantly turned sleuth; a second series features mid-Victorian chimney sweep Tom Wasp. With this new story Ms. Myers steps into the twentieth century and the world of early movie fandom. One of her Didier stories is scheduled for the June *EQMM*. Don't miss it!

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at a standstill. The newspaper next day said there were 5,000 people gathered outside, and she was one of them. She and Gladys had fought their way almost to the front, and Rudolph had looked right at her. Gladys said it was her he looked at, but Ruby knew different. After all, Gladys was a blonde and it was obvious Rudolph preferred dark-haired women like Ruby. Ruby had fainted dead away, and when she got home Harold hadn't been in the least sympathetic. It had been a comedown returning home to Harold with her fish and chips making her gloves all greasy, but in her soul she was still with Rudolph being rescued from her runaway carriage by the handsome Cossack lieutenant, and this comforted her a lot.

"If only Harold had a chest like Rudolph instead of being all flabby and hairy," Ruby had wailed to Gladys.

"I'll tell you someone who has." Gladys giggled.

"Frank?" Ruby couldn't believe that of Gladys's meek and mild husband. He was even plumper than Harold. He and Frank were chums, in a way, because they were both commercial travellers. Harold reckoned he had more style than Frank owing to the fact that Frank only dealt in kitchen goods, but Harold travelled in ladies' stockings. It sounded funny to Ruby, the way he put it, travelling in ladies' stockings, but when Harold got red in the face she stopped laughing. He did not like his pride hurt.

"No. Cyril Tucker," Gladys said.

"Who's he?" Ruby asked blankly, not being able to remember any film stars of that name.

"Keep a secret?"

"Of course," Ruby breathed, leaning closer.

"Our milkman."

Ruby was an innocent in such matters. "How do you know, Glad?"

"He obliges."

"Obliges what?"

"When he comes for his money on a Friday, he—well, you know."

Ruby didn't.

"He doesn't mind doing a Valentino for me," Gladys amplified.

"Glad!" Ruby was overawed. "You mean he takes off his shirt for you?"

"More than that, Rube."

Ruby's bow-shaped mouth opened wide in shock. "Oh, Glad!" And when Gladys sniggered, she continued with dignity, "I'm going right home now and pretend you never told me that." She'd never taken much notice of their milkman. He wore the usual blue-and-white striped apron over his clothes and a cap, and she'd not looked at him much otherwise. When she began to think, though, she supposed he was quite good-looking. How Gladys

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could, however. She decided not to see Glad for at least a day.

And so it might have ended, had Harold not complained about having sardines on toast for his tea two days running. It put her in a bad mood, and she told him he was jolly lucky to get any tea at all, considering she'd only just got back from a reshowing of *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.* What did he expect? she hurled at him.

"What I expect," Harold said pathetically, "is a wife who doesn't have Rudolph Valentino tucked up in our spare room."

"Oh, Harold." Ruby was mortified at this unfair criticism. "You can't deny me that. Here I am every day all alone."

The spare room was her temple — or, rather, her tent, her Room of Araby. It was swathed in yards and yards of white sheeting and curtain net from Woolwich Market, and below it was a divan with a pillow and cover almost exactly like in the film. From the walls Rudolph gazed down at her in adoration as the Sheik, the Young Rajah, Monsieur Beaucaire (holding a lute in a way which Gladys said looked so *naughty*), and as Julio, the sultry tango dancer. Words from the films adorned each wall, painstakingly typed out on their old typewriter, together with the sheet music of "The Sheik of Araby," which she thumped out on the piano wistfully when Harold was away. (He said it disturbed his digestion.)

"I don't know why you do it," he said, perplexed.

"I just like him."

"He looks like a pouf."

"A what?"

Harold reddened. "Never you mind."

"I won't have you being rude about Rudolph. You're just jealous."

"I'm not," Harold cried defiantly.

"Oh, Harold." Ruby relented, sighing deeply. "If only you were more masterful."

Ruby was never quite sure what had made her take the final step in providing herself with her own sheikh. She thought it was probably the waste.

As she looked round her Room of Araby the day after that conversation with Harold, it occurred to her that her body was crying out for the intimate attentions of a sheik. Unfortunately Rudolph himself was far away and could not be counted upon for this task. He would never realise how desperately she needed him. She was forced to face the fact that meeting his eyes across the crowd was the nearest she would ever get to him. And Harold wasn't sufficient replacement. When he rolled over, just grunting, "Goodnight, old girl," she was left with a feeling that life must have more to offer her.

She slept alone in the Room of Araby when he was away on his

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travels, imagining her sheik by her side, and those eyes staring down at her. Longingly, desirously. In her heart, she was Lady Diana Mayo from the film, not Ruby Smart, and at last she had decided she could wait no longer.

Cyril Tucker, or Rudolph as he was to her, had proved to be everything Gladys had said and more. It was a little hard the first time. As he took off that awful cap, she saw immediately that the sleeked-down dark hair was a considerable improvement. And those sideboards! She had self-consciously led the way upstairs, wondering if her stocking tops were showing under the scallops of her short skirt and trying to pull it down in case. Once his apron, waistcoat, shirt, and vest went, magic had taken the place of doubts as to the wisdom of this venture. His manly chest flexed magnificently as he strode meaningfully towards her.

Ecstatically, she had swooned in his arms, then felt herself lifted high in the air, then tossed mercilessly onto the divan. Her body ached for him, but she trembled with delicious fear, as had Lady Diana Mayo.

"Why have you brought me here?" she uttered the famous words.

Her eyes closed, then flew open again, so as not to miss a moment of this rapture. Slowly, silently, menacingly, he bent over her, eyes fixed desirously upon her person.

"Are you not woman enough to know?" he grated on cue. Then his hands removed the white jumper Mum had knitted her last Christmas, he patted her feet, just as Rudolph had in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,* then slowly and sensuously drew off Harold's best artificial silk stockings from her legs and invitingly stroked Lady Diana's camiknickers.

"Oh, Rudolph," she sighed, happy at last as she lay back to accept her fate.

It had become a regular fixture. Gladys had already bagged Friday lunchtime, and even Rudolph could not manage more than one Lady Diana a morning, so it was arranged that Tuesday afternoon after he finished his rounds would be a very nice time to call.

When, at the beginning of August, 1926, Harold announced he had to go to York, up north somewhere, for four weeks, Saturday afternoon was temporarily added to the itinerary. After all, she had several weeks to pass before the London release of *Son of the Sheik,* and needed something to take her mind off the long hours of waiting.

Ruby looked up with red-rimmed eyes as Gladys came through the back door. She, too, was clad all in black. They had been in mourning for several days now. It was lucky Harold was still away up north or he'd have kicked up such a fuss. Frank never said a

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word, according to Gladys. He understood. Frank always did, not like Harold, Ruby thought enviously. How could anyone not share their grief? Rudolph was dead. Gladys's and her lives were over. Romance had ended. There would be no more films after *Son of the Sheik*.

The tragedy had come out of the blue. First came the shock that Rudolph was ill and had to have an operation for gastric ulcer and appendicitis. Then the relief when it was successful and he was said to be recuperating well. Then came the terrible news that he was dead. It was unbelievable. How could they let him die? Each morning she seized the newspaper to read every tiny detail. She realised that she was not alone in her loss. Women, and men, too, had flocked to Campbell's Funeral Parlor on Broadway, and mounted police had to be called in to prevent the crowds storming the parlor in their grief. Inside lay his—oh, she could hardly bear to read it—poor body in a bronze coffin, his beautiful face and shoulders exposed.

"Look, Ruby!" Gladys sniffled, thrusting yet another newspaper under Ruby's nose. "Isn't that Harold?"

"Harold? Glad, don't make jokes at a time like this." Ruby glanced at the photograph of the queue waiting to enter the funeral parlour. And, yes, it did indeed look rather like Harold in the queue. But how could it be? She supposed that could have been his Homburg hat, and that certainly resembled his samples case of ladies' stockings. Nevertheless Ruby was quite sure it could not have been Harold.

"He's up north somewhere, so it can't be."

"Looks like him, Rube." They agreed it was queer but they had a more pressing problem to consider: Cyril. Was it, or was it not, morally right to continue with Cyril's services, when Rudolph himself was dead?

Gladys was in no doubt that it was. After all, she explained: "It's like his spirit come to bless us, isn't it?"

Ruby found that very consoling. Even so, she thought it right to wear a black armband when she saw Cyril on Saturday, and insisted on keeping it on after he had ripped all her clothes off, even her rubber corsets, and had her shivering helplessly before him. Cyril had sniggered when he saw it, and she reproved him.

"Don't laugh, please." Sometimes it occurred to her that Cyril was a little common.

"Whatever you say, Ruby. You're the boss."

"No, *you* are, Rudolph."

Cyril had belatedly remembered his role, picked her up and thrown her on the divan most satisfactorily. (On one terrible occasion he had missed and it had been most painful.) His eyes smouldered and if only she could ignore his flashy new combinations,

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the illusion would be complete. What did he think she had provided all the proper costumes for? She had given him Don Alonzo's gaucho hat, his matador's jacket, Monsieur Beaucaire's wig, his sheik's turban complete with tassel, and the Young Rajah outfit. Finally, the offending combinations were removed.

"Lie still, you little fool," he whispered, looking almost as handsome as Rudolph himself.

Even though Rudolph was dead, it was a great comfort to Ruby to know that he lived on at 12 The Cedars.

"Yes, it's probably me." Harold gave a cursory look at the newspaper picture on his return on the Monday evening.

Ruby, who had assumed by now that the man in the photograph could not possibly have been her husband, was flabbergasted. "But you said you were going to York."

"*New* York, I said."

Ruby tried to take this in, and fastened on the one salient point. "But why go to the funeral parlour? You didn't even like Rudolph." Then a warm glow spread through her. "Oh, Harold, did you do it for me?"

"No, Ruby. I killed him, you see. Then I thought I'd take a last look at my handiwork."

Ruby didn't understand. "What do you mean, killed him?"

"I murdered him."

With this pronouncement, Harold sat down with the *Daily Mail* as though he were asking for a cup of tea.

"Who?" she shrieked.

"Your precious Rudolph Valentino."

"Don't make fun of me, Harold."

"I'm not, Ruby. You said I should be more masterful, so I went out there and murdered him."

The room spun around her. "You'd never kill anyone."

"I never wanted to before." There was a touch of complacency in Harold's voice. He was smiling in a most peculiar way, and Ruby felt quite uneasy. The newspapers said Rudolph died of complications after the operation, so were they covering something up? If so, what was it? And if Harold had murdered him, what was her husband doing safely back home instead of being locked up in Sing Sing like in the films?

Then she realised this was all nonsense. Harold was pulling her leg. "He died of complications after a gastric ulcer and appendicitis," she said scornfully, "and anyway he was in hospital when he died."

"Recuperating on the ninth floor of the Polyclinic Hospital. Armed guards all around."

"There you are, then. You couldn't have murdered him." Not that

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Ruby had *really* thought he had, but all the same it was a relief to know he couldn't possibly have done so. But why was he still grinning at her?

"Ah, but it wasn't a gastric ulcer, was it? It was arsenic," Harold informed her.

"Arsenic?" she shrieked. "That's poison."

"Yes, and it doesn't half do nasty things to your stomach."

"How could you get close enough to Rudolph to poison him?" Ruby hardly dared breathe his sacred name in company with such an outrage.

"It was easy. He was taken ill at a party, and I was there."

"How did *you* get to a party with Rudolph?" She couldn't believe it, no, she couldn't.

"I met this fellow in the hotel who told me he was a chum of your precious Rudy. He said he was off to a party in an hour or two being given for him by a friend of his, Barclay something or other. So I told him my wife was a fan and she'd never forgive me if I let an opportunity to meet him slip by." Harold giggled. "I got this rat poison easily enough, and poured it into this drink I handed him." Ruby gave a faint cry. "When the party broke up, I followed the Great Lover back to his hotel and waited outside for a while. Sure enough, an ambulance was called an hour or two later and off he went to hospital. I bet he didn't look so handsome then." He glanced at her stupefied face. "Shall I show you the tin? Would that convince you?"

"Harold," she moaned, backing away from him. She was already convinced. There was his picture in the newspaper and he knew details the papers hadn't revealed. She, Ruby Smart of Blackheath (well, Woolwich really, only it was nearly Blackheath) was responsible for the death of Rudolph Valentino. There'd be a trial. She'd have to give evidence. She would call it Blackheath then. All these thoughts raced through her mind and then her brain clarified.

"I'll have to go to the police."

Harold looked serious. "Of course, Ruby. I'd expect you to. It's only right. I'm ready to face the consequences like a man."

Feeling the whole weight of the world on her shoulders, Ruby put on her best dress next morning and took the 11:18 train to Charing Cross. This was too serious a matter for the Woolwich police station. She had to go to the top. She walked self-consciously to Scotland Yard on the Embankment. She wasn't even nervous. She was doing this for Rudolph, sacrificing her own husband for justice.

The gentleman at the desk was very polite when she said she'd come to report a murder. Had it just happened, he asked? No, she explained, about two weeks ago in America. She was asked to wait and another gentleman came almost straightaway, though he

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wasn't in uniform, which rather disappointed her.

Ruby sat primly on the chair, smoothing her skirt down. It would never do to display too much thigh here. It would be letting Rudolph down.

"You tell me about it, Mrs. Smart," the policeman said encouragingly. "Who's dead?"

And so she explained everything.

"Rudolph Valentino, eh?" was all he commented.

To her great indignation, she could see he was trying not to laugh.

"Well, Mrs. Smart, I think your husband is having you on, don't you?"

"No," she said truthfully. "He wouldn't do that." But then she wondered whether perhaps he was right. After all, she had been so sure it was York Harold was going to. The policeman then sent for someone to make her a nice cup of tea, and assured her, as he ushered her out, that he would make enquiries with the FBI in America.

That sounded right to Ruby, but she ventured to ask, "When will you arrest Harold? I'll have to pack something for him, you see."

"We'll let you know," he replied gravely. "It'll be out of my hands, Mrs. Smart."

Greatly relieved, Ruby had her tea and left. After all, Harold knew she was coming here, so she wasn't worried about getting home quickly—even though she suddenly realised it was Tuesday and she'd forgotten to cancel Cyril's visit. Harold must have been at work, though, and even if he were home early Cyril would have thought up some excuse. When she got back home, Harold was indeed there, however. He was watering the tomatoes. A keen gardener, was Harold.

"I've done it," she announced, just a little uncertain of her reception.

"Oh, good. By the way, Ruby, I've put a little memento from New York for you in the spare room."

She flew upstairs, half expecting to find Rudolph's dead body, maybe even something personal to him. Heart aflame, she could see just a single red rose, very withered—as one would expect if Rudolph had handed it to Harold two or three weeks ago. Underneath, however, was a little note from Harold:

"Ha, ha, I was joking, Ruby."

She didn't know whether to be furious or relieved. She decided on fury for tonight and then she'd relent tomorrow.

The next morning she duly relented. First of all, she'd found the receipts from his hotel while he'd been away, and that had been in York, not America. So it was a joke, although one in very poor

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taste. Never mind. Perhaps since he was disappointed yesterday, her very own Rudolph in the form of Cyril would come this afternoon instead. After all, she and Gladys had agreed Valentino was immortal, and so she could mourn him through Cyril. That's what Gladys was going to do anyway.

Strangely, no milk had been delivered that morning. It didn't arrive until lunchtime, and was then delivered by a new unknown milkman. "Where's our usual man?" Ruby asked, trying to sound as if she didn't care.

"Don't know, missis. Didn't turn up for work."

Now that *was* unlike Cyril. Perhaps he was ill, she thought, although he had certainly been in the pink of health last week. He'd danced the tango with her, she swathed in a sheet, he bare-chested. It was a preliminary to a most exciting sequel, when he steered her to the divan, whipped off her sheet, and proceeded to treat her very masterfully indeed.

"What's up, Ruby?" asked Harold, who had belatedly told her he had the week off.

"Our milkman's ill," Ruby said, trying not to go pink.

"He's getting quite a reputation round here," Harold observed.

"For not delivering milk?"

"With the ladies. So Frank says."

Ruby was instantly alert. "I haven't heard."

"You wouldn't," Harold replied darkly. "Wouldn't be surprised if some jealous husband hadn't done him in."

No milk? Frank involved? Ruby couldn't wait for Harold to go out so she could run round to Gladys's. At last, he went, and the minute Gladys saw Ruby she burst into tears.

"Rudolph's dead," she moaned.

"Well, I know that, Glad. It's awful, but Rudolph's in heaven now."

"Not him. Our Valentino. Cyril."

"Cyril?" Ruby went white. What was this all about?

"Strangled with a stocking, he was," Gladys continued. "Found in the woods at Shooter's Hill."

"I can't believe it," Ruby gasped. "Not Cyril."

Even as she said it, though, she thought of Harold being alone in the house when Cyril would have called yesterday. Thought of what Harold had said about jealous husbands, and wondered if by any terrible chance Harold knew about Cyril somehow. But how could he? They'd been so careful, she and Gladys. There was no doubt there was something odd about Harold yesterday, though. Yet how would Harold have got the body to Shooter's Hill? Almost instantly she realised how he could have managed it. Behind The Cedars was a back alleyway which the dustmen used. Cyril used to leave his horse and cart there out of sight when he called as

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Valentino. All Harold would have had to do was hide the body amongst the milk cans and bottles, put Cyril's cap and big apron on, and drive off. He liked driving horses and carts. He'd told her once it all came of having an auntie who lived out Dartford way in the country.

Ruby's imagination worked overtime.

"What kind of stocking was it?" She blurted out the question without thinking how odd this sounded.

"How would I know?" Gladys shrugged.

When Harold came back with the evening papers, it was all over the front cover. "That's our milkman," she said to him, as he hung up his coat and handed it to her to read.

"That's right," Harold said in his jolly tone.

"It says he was strangled with a silk stocking."

"Two, actually."

"Two?" Ruby wailed. "How do you know?"

"One stocking is strong, so I tell my ladies," Harold carefully explained. "But it's not that strong. Our milkman was a big man, Ruby. Bigger than Valentino. But then you'd know that, wouldn't you?"

Ruby couldn't speak for fear at first, then she managed to say, "What can you mean, Harold?"

"I said some jealous husband probably did him in. It was me. I've been jealous of him for some time. He would keep leaving his blessed turban in the spare room. I couldn't stand it, Ruby. I was joking about the first Valentino, but I decided to murder this one for real. I got the idea in York. There was an American newspaperman in the hotel who got all the details about Valentino's death, more than the papers here carried. So I decided to act. Do you know, Ruby, I believe I'm becoming very masterful indeed."

Ruby let out one long wail, as Harold went on to describe exactly how he'd killed Cyril Tucker and how he'd got the body to Shooter's Hill—just the way she'd thought. He even considerately described a birthmark on Cyril's chest for her, just in case she should be in any doubt.

"I suppose you'll have to tell the police, otherwise they'll suspect all the other husbands around here," Harold said, using his jolly voice again.

"All?" Ruby repeated faintly.

"Oh yes. Our Rudolph was quite a Casanova. Quite a Valentino, in fact. He had a day for each of you. You weren't the only one. I wonder what you'll all do now?"

Ruby suddenly found her voice. "I'm going to tell on you. You killed my very own Rudolph."

"I'm glad you believe me, Ruby. I did bring his Monsieur Beaucaire wig with me to convince you. I found it in the cart."

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Ruby screamed. Sobbing, she ran from the room. She had to get back to Scotland Yard to tell them the terrible truth. She didn't even stop to put her best dress on this time, and she ran all the way from Charing Cross to the Embankment. She was quite out of breath by the time she finally panted up to the front desk.

"It's me again, Mrs. Ruby Smart," she told the man.

He grinned at her. "I'll take your statement, madam."

"No, I must see the policeman I saw yesterday."

She had to wait some time on this occasion, and when he appeared she wasn't taken to another room, but had to tell him the awful truth then and there.

"My husband did it. Rudolph Valentino, no, I mean the milkman in the woods. He's Valentino. My husband murdered him." She saw the disbelieving look in his eyes, and struggled on desperately. "It was really Cyril Tucker, well, you know that, but we call him Rudolph Valentino, and my husband—"

"Now, Mrs. Smart, we've already arrested a man in connection with that. Frank Perkins, I think he lives further up your street."

"Frank? But he didn't, he couldn't. Oh no, you've got it all wrong."

"We had good reason to arrest him, Mrs. Smart. You'll see it all in the papers tomorrow, no doubt, so I'll tell you. He had all the Valentino kit in his study, poor fellow. Wigs, turbans, whips. Round the bend with jealousy. So you go home and have a nice cup of tea, Mrs. Smart."

She wasn't even entitled to receive one here today. Frank couldn't possibly have been involved. It was obvious Harold was trying to blame it on Frank and now they weren't even listening to her, and Harold would go scot-free. Perhaps it was all a joke. Pehaps Frank really had done it, but somehow she knew that couldn't be true. Anyway, she'd done her best, and it wasn't her fault they wouldn't listen. She put her key in the lock and turned it. As she kicked off her shoes inside so as not to dirty the desert-coloured carpet (her choice), she could hear voices from upstairs, which was odd. And odd sounds, too. Thumps and giggles.

Coming from the Room of Araby.

Indignant and terrified at the same time, she raced up the stairs as she heard the grating sound: "Lie still, you little fool."

It must be one of her gramophone records. It must be. Heart pounding, she threw open the door.

Rudolph Valentino in sheik's outfit, minus the top half, but including a whip, didn't even look up. Below him Lady Diana Mayo sighed in ecstasy. Gladys had found another sheik.

"Harold! What are you doing?" Ruby moaned.

Harold grinned before he turned back to his captive: "Are you not woman enough to know?" ●

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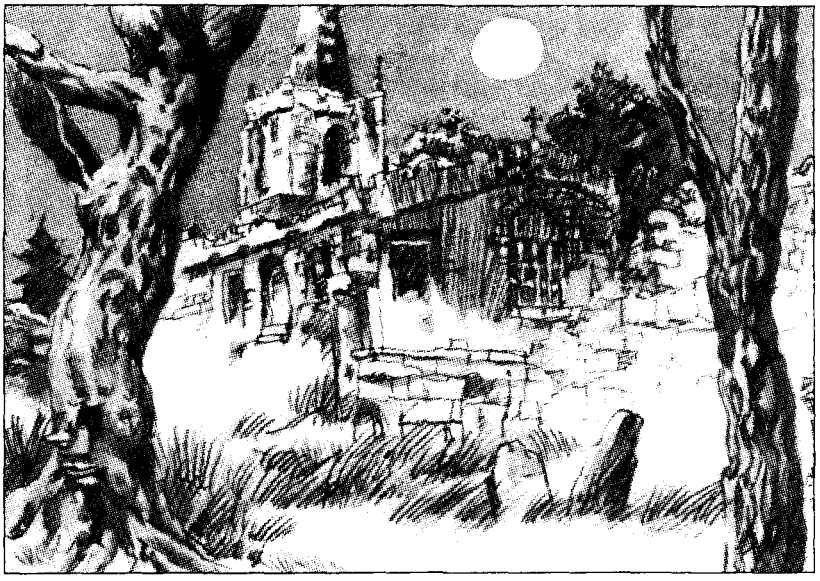

Art by Ron Buccalo

THE WIDOW OF SLANE

by Terence Faherty

1.

"It can never have been murder. Never in life. You don't murder a man by dropping a stone on his head. It's too uncertain. You can't aim an awful great stone. It was an accident, surely. A freak accident. That stone's been teetering up there since Cromwell's men burned the friary. And three months ago this very night it fell. It fell and hit poor Timothy McKinney on the head."

The speaker was a tiny man in tweeds of muted colors and sharp aromas, one of which was pipe tobacco. He tapped out his briar into an empty glass and repeated, "*It hit poor Timothy McKinney* on the head."

"God rest his soul," said the passing bartender, a very busy man. "And use the damn ashtray."

A second man at the crowded bar, this one standing to my right, observed, "Sure, it would have been like a bad mystery novel, where the victim has to do exactly what the murderer wants him to do, where he wants him to do it and when, for the plot to work."

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The tweedy man snatched this up. "I know the very one you mean. By Dorothy something Sayers. Man killed by a swinging weight, a booby trap he trips himself at the appointed place and hour. Stage business. Not real life. Not real murder."

I was familiar with the book in question, though my tastes ran to more worldly investigators than Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey. I was even familiar with the criticism of the murder method used in that book, and I'd always considered that criticism to be nine-tenths carping. The act the murder victim had to perform at a specific time and place for the booby trap to work was switching on a big console radio for the evening news, a perfectly ordinary thing, and one that could only be done at a specific time and place.

The Private Eye Writers of America recently awarded Terence Faherty the 2002 Shamus Award for Best Short Story for his *EQMM* tale "The Second Coming" (11/02). The story belongs to a series about post-World War II Hollywood P.I. Scott Elliott, and *EQMM* has more in the series coming up later this year. This time out, Mr. Faherty returns to his earlier creation, Owen Keane. Keane is on vacation in Ireland, but murder follows him there. . . . †

The tweedy man's dismissal of the murder technique as stage business was truer than he seemed to know. Sayers had based her book—murder weapon and all—on a successful stage play. Observing that aloud would have been a way to inject myself into the conversation, but I didn't do it. I was feeling a little too dizzy.

It wasn't alcohol, either, though I had a pint glass before me on the bar. It was the unreality of the moment. Of being in Ireland, a country I'd always dreamt of visiting without ever expecting I would. It was the coincidence of hearing Dorothy Sayers discussed while I was sipping a Guinness, a product she'd helped to advertise as a young copywriter. It was the further coincidence of hearing a discussion of an unsolved mystery. I'd sworn off mysteries almost as often as I'd sworn off drinking.

"The coincidence, though," the man on my right said, yanking me out of my reverie by seeming to read my thoughts. "The coincidence of Tim's being in that spot when the stone fell. It's too much entirely." He was a tall man with a nose like the dorsal fin of a shark, the prominence topped by tiny steel-framed glasses. "Much too much. Whatever was Tim doing up there in the middle of the night?"

"What we all of us hope to be doing in the middle of the night," the tweedy man said, raising a general laugh. "The question is, who was he doing it with? And who found out about it?"

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"That's enough," the bartender said, slapping the bar top with a hand that seemed used to the job. He was a big man, though not young, not even by my middle-aged standards, and his name was Mullin. He had a prizefighter's battered face and a comb-over that was plastered to his scalp by perspiration.

"Tim McKinney was a good lad. He'd be working the sticks here tonight, drawing your precious weekly pint for you, O'Rooney"—he glared at the tweedy man—"if he hadn't been taken in his prime. Didn't I plan for him to run this place for my Margaret when I'm gone myself? I won't have any loose talk about him. Nor about Breda, the widow."

"The black widow," someone behind me muttered.

The big hand came down on the bar again. "That's enough, I said. What must our American, Mr. Keane, be thinking?" he asked, nodding toward me. "And him sleeping under the widow's roof."

I was actually sleeping in the widow's bed. As conversation material went, that would have beaten senseless any observations I might have made on Dorothy Sayers's technique. But still I played mum, unwilling to brag at the expense of Breda's reputation. Even if I hadn't been, I would have feared the scowling Mullin's displeasure.

The beaky man, perhaps counting on his eyeglasses to save his remarkable nose, showed no such concern. "She hasn't an alibi for that night, Mr. Mullin. The night Tim died. I heard that myself from Constable Garvey."

"And what alibi would you expect a respectable woman to have at midnight when her husband's away?" the exasperated pub owner demanded. "Do you expect signed affidavits? Why should Breda McKinney produce an alibi at all?"

"She shouldn't," O'Rooney of the tweeds cut in. "For it can't have been murder. I've reasoned that right off the list. You don't murder a man by dropping a stone on his head."

2.

I was in Ireland in the first place, in the village of Slane in the county of Meath, on a whim. I'd been on my way from Nairobi, Kenya, to New York, stopping over in Heathrow, outside London. It would take a book to explain the Africa trip, so I'll just say that I was sent there by a friend to help another friend. At Heathrow I'd seen a poster for Ireland and decided on the spot to treat myself to a side trip, to spend money I really couldn't afford to spend on a few days in the land of my ancestors.

My first glimpse of Ireland had been through the crazed window of a turboprop and a layer of patchy clouds as we'd descended to land at Dublin. Even that suburban landscape had been so green and lush after the dry brown of Kenya that I'd stared on and on,

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forgetting for once to be afraid of the business of landing. I'd rented a car and driven north into the Boyne Valley, where my mother's people had lived. I'd ended up in the crossroads town of Slane because it had a ruined friary and because it was close to Newgrange and its massive Celtic burial mound.

I'd stayed on in Slane for a second night because of Breda McKinney, who owned and ran the Hill of Slane Bed and Breakfast. How it had ended up being bed, breakfast, and sex for me, I still didn't quite understand.

I was considering the question as I left Mullin's Pub and started down the hill to Breda's. Though the June night was mild, the air was damp. I turned the collar of my navy blazer up and held its lapels flat against my chest with one hand.

I guessed Breda to be in her thirties, young to be a widow. She looked younger still despite her hard-luck life. She was a very petite woman whose pale skin was set off by almost black hair, the darkest I'd seen in Ireland. Her eyes were also very dark, very round, and very large. A child's eyes, when they were happy. A doll's dead eyes at other times. Her mouth was tiny and thin-lipped, with a tendency toward wry smiles.

She'd greeted me with one of those smiles when I'd shown up late, with no reservation, the prior evening. She'd shown me to her best room—all of them being empty—and then invited me to share her peat fire in the parlor. That invitation had been stretched to include a whiskey and then another, and we'd sat talking together for hours.

We hadn't talked much of personal things, I now realized. My head had been full of Africa, and I'd shared a little of that story, of the mystery I'd solved there, with this safe stranger. Breda had talked more of the Boyne Valley than herself, of her love for it and of its long history. She'd only touched on her dead husband in passing, never mentioning how he'd died.

As she'd been describing the legendary signal fire St. Patrick had built on the hill where the friary now stood, the fire that had been a challenge to the pagan Irish nobility on the Hill of Tara across the valley, it had occurred to me that the parlor's simple peat fire, when reflected in the dark eyes of a beautiful woman, was as wonderful as any lit by a saint.

Shortly after that, she'd taken my hand and said, "I've one more bed to show you."

Mullin's place was on the Newgrange Road—the High Street, the locals called it—and Breda's stone house on a crooked little lane well down the hill. As I made the left from the street to the lane, a man stepped from a shadowy shop door and said, "We're a priest tonight, are we?"

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Anyone surprised like that on a dark corner in a strange town might have jumped, as I did. Anyone might have been disoriented by the nonsensical question, as I was. But only someone who had studied for the priesthood, as I had once done, could really savor the full potential of the moment.

"I said, we're a priest tonight, are we?"

The speaker was a big man who seemed huge just then, an ashen-faced man whose skin seemed to glow. He was dressed as most of the men in the pub had been dressed, in a farmer's version of business casual: a shapeless woolen suit coat over a rumpled, open-neck shirt and baggy pants. The flat cap on his head was pulled low, keeping what light there was from reaching his eyes.

"I bet you treat your vows no better than the old friars did, the lechers."

Though I couldn't see his eyes, I somehow knew they were fixed on my chest. And I realized that I was still holding my lapels shut against the damp, making a Nehru jacket of my blazer and creating the illusion of a Roman collar around my neck.

I took my hand away, and my coat fell open. "I'm not a priest, I'm a tourist," I said, surprised to hear more Guinness than fear in my voice.

"Staying at the Hill of Slane?" the roadblock asked. "Keeping the lady of the house up all night, are you? With your comings and goings?"

Either this stranger had a gift for firing blind or he was unusually well-informed. Supernaturally well-informed, perhaps. Though I was no great believer in ghosts, I found myself wishing I'd asked for a physical description of Tim McKinney back at the bar.

"The thing about tourists is," the stranger observed, "they move on. Try the west. Try it first light."

3.

My new acquaintance left me then, not dematerializing but simply brushing past me and stomping off into the High Street. I listened to the sound of his angry steps for a time. Then I made my way down the lane to a stone house whose front windows illuminated the sign for the Hill of Slane Bed and Breakfast.

Breda was sitting up for me, as I'd expected. She had some expectations of her own, which a single glance at me confirmed.

"They told you then, did they, Owen? The Mullin's Pub oral-history society? Told you the whole wonderful story?"

"Not the whole story," I said.

"Enough, though. More than enough, I can see that. You're white underneath your African tan."

She was seated on the little sofa near the peat fire where we'd

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had our marathon talk. She was barefoot, oddly, since in addition to jeans she was wearing a cardigan sweater as long as a bathrobe, which she held tight around her. The long black hair that had been loose and flowing when I'd left her was now pulled back tight and largely hidden by the sweater's heavy collar. It was her dead husband's sweater, I realized with a little shudder.

"If I'm pale," I said, "it's the work of a guy I bumped into up the block. You might know him. Size of a small house."

Breda considered this while staring into the fire. There was nothing childlike about her eyes tonight.

"But they did tell you," she said. "The drunks in the pub. All about how Tim died. About what he was doing up at the old friary at midnight. And who found out about it and what she did to him. They mentioned the name 'black widow,' I'm sure."

I was still standing one step into the room. Now I crossed to the little sofa and sat down unbidden. Breda made me feel welcome by drawing her sweater tighter around herself and whispering, "The black widow of Slane."

"What was your husband doing up at the friary the night he died?"

"God knows. He was fascinated by the place. By any old ruins. By any old legend. By ghost stories, especially. He was a ghost chaser, I guess you'd say. It was his great dream to see one. I would much rather he'd been a skirt chaser. I could have dealt with that."

She looked from the fire to me. "You have the same something in your eyes; I saw it when you came in last night. The same as Tim, I mean. The look of a man who sees things that aren't there. Who looks for things that aren't there. Mystical things. That's what killed Tim: some mystical thing."

"I heard it was a big rock."

Breda responded to my bluntness with her wry smile. "There's nothing more mystical in Ireland than the rocks. The stones. You went to Newgrange today. You took the guided tour. You went down into the heart of that great pile of stone. Don't tell me you didn't feel anything, any vibrations."

"Only claustrophobia." I was hoping for another smile, however wry. What I got was another question.

"What else did the drinkers say about me, Owen?"

"Nothing. Mullin put a lid on it."

"The least he could do," Breda said bitterly, "for the widow of his pet employee. Three months Tim's been gone and the talking hasn't stopped. Oh me, oh me."

She couldn't expect gossip like that to die in three months. Not in a town without a sports franchise. But I didn't point that out. I'd been struck by another thought.

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"It was your suggestion that I go up to Mullin's and get a pint. Did you send me there as a scout, to see if they were still talking about you?"

Breda's pale cheeks flushed. "Maybe I wanted you to hear the gossip so you'd be easier to get rid of. Maybe I wanted to scare you off. Have you figured out yet what your great attraction is for me? Could it be that you're a stranger with a perfectly innocent reason for being in my house? The only man I could take into my bed without starting the tongues wagging, without bringing the constable and his notebook around? Three months is a long time to fast. A woman gets less choosy."

Now we were both flushed. "And here I thought it was the mystical look in my eyes," I said as I stood up.

From the parlor doorway, I added, "I was told something else at the pub. You don't have an alibi for the night your husband died."

"Oh, I have an alibi," Breda replied. She was staring into the turf fire again. "You met him just now in the lane. Checkout is eleven sharp, Mr. Keane."

4.

I slept alone that second night at the Hill of Slane Bed and Breakfast, but I didn't check out the next morning. I snuck out instead. While Breda was busy in the kitchen, I slipped into the lane and made my way up to the High Street.

It was going to be a beautiful June day in Ireland, which meant that a sweater would be optional. After noon, that is. Noon was hours away and I had no sweater, so I turned up my collar and tugged my lapels together, joining the priesthood again. The irregular priesthood.

My very vague plan was to chat up Mullin the pub owner, to get an unbiased version of Timothy McKinney's death. But when I neared the crossroads where the pub sat, I smelled bacon frying and coffee and added them to my list of goals.

Unfortunately, the front door of the pub was locked. I went around to the side door, following the breakfast smells. My knock was answered by a woman who identified herself as Mullin's cook and looked like she might be his sister. His older, burlier sister. She told me that the owner was off to market, asked me if I'd had my breakfast, and invited me in.

I decided that the cook might do as well or better than Mullin as a source of information, but she didn't give me a chance to start the interview. She sat me and a mug of coffee at a round table in a very small dining room, asked me how I liked my eggs, and bustled out.

The little room was decorated with photographs. Family photographs, I saw when I got up to look them over. Mullin appeared

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in most of them, recognizable at any age due to his mashed nose. He appeared in one with a woman and a young girl and in many of the others with the girl alone. I decided that she was the daughter he'd mentioned—Margaret—and that her mother had either died or taken off. In one shot, Mullin was standing with his arm around a white-haired man. Behind them was the familiar pub, but the name above the door was Carlin and Mullin's.

While I was studying this picture, I heard a foot scuff behind me. A young woman was standing in the kitchen doorway, a thin woman a head taller than Breda McKinney, very delicately featured and lightly freckled. Her long brown hair had a frazzled, overcooked quality, which didn't keep her from chewing on a strand of it.

For a second I thought I'd guessed wrong about Mullin being wifeless, for this was surely the woman in the group photo, Margaret's mother. Then I realized that it was Margaret herself, grown up. Or almost so.

"Morning," I said. "You're Margaret, right? Your dad told me about you. My name's Owen. I'm from America."

Only the last part of that interested her. She gave off the hair chewing to ask, "Where in America?"

"New Jersey, the Garden State." The odds were she'd never find out how inaccurate that nickname was.

"That's near New York," she said.

"Yes. I've lived there, too."

Another layer of her many-layered shyness dropped away. "I'm going to New York someday. To live."

"You'll like it." Actually I thought she'd have her hair chewed down to the roots in a week. But I wanted to stay on her good side. She was another potential source of information about the dead McKinney. He'd worked in her father's bar, after all. And Mullin had planned for McKinney to run the place for Margaret when he was gone, according to what he'd told his customers last night. Now that I'd met her, I understood why Mullin would want to make that kind of provision.

It seemed to me that Margaret and I were as friendly as we were going to get, so I said, "I guess you knew Timothy McKinney pretty well."

She stood there frozen for a second, only her small blue eyes—very small compared with Breda's—moving. They darted back and forth, scanning the air between us as though she were reading and rereading my words.

Then she was gone, slamming the door behind her.

5.

I didn't get any more out of the cook than I'd gotten out of Margaret. The big woman had observed the girl's flight and blamed

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me for it, not unreasonably. I was shown out without so much as a burnt piece of toast.

That concluded the planned portion of my day. I was standing in the crossroads before the pub, trying to regroup, when a man rode up on a bicycle. He was wearing the dark blue uniform of the Irish police, the Guarda.

"Good morning," he said.

"Morning," I said. "Constable Garvey?"

"However did you know my name?"

"I heard it last night in the pub."

Garvey stopped his bike, still eyeing me closely. He was a solidly built young man, not overly tall. His teeth were crooked and prematurely yellow, but his smile looked genuine.

"Heard my name in the pub? Taken in vain, I'm sure."

"Mentioned in connection with Timothy McKinney's death," I said. "With the investigation of it."

"A sad business."

"I'd like to hear more about it."

Garvey had been straddling his bike. He stepped off it now. "Perhaps you'd better put us on an equal footing first, by introducing yourself."

I did, explaining that I was stopping over at the Hill of Slane Bed and Breakfast. I didn't mention having once had my breakfast in bed with my landlady, but something of my concern for Breda must have come through. The constable was nodding before I'd finished.

"I feel for her situation. She's in limbo, you know. True limbo. If only I could have brought the thing to a satisfactory conclusion. Worked out an answer."

He was looking up the hill toward the ruined friary, gray and stark against the morning sky. "Would you care to see where it happened? I have to go up there and unlock the tourist gate."

He stashed his bike in the pub's alley and we started up the road on foot, Garvey explaining that the bike was his doctor's idea and not his regulation ride. Cycling seemed to be working out for him. He spoke without effort as we climbed, while I was breathing seriously by the time we reached the iron gate in the wall that surrounded the ruins. A rusted tin sign informed me that the gate was locked each night at eight.

I said, "Tim McKinney died around midnight, didn't he?"

"As near as anyone can tell. His body wasn't found until the next morning—by a couple from your St. Paul, Minnesota, by the way. Certainly the last anyone saw of Tim alive was when he locked up the pub a little after eleven."

"The sign says the gate's locked at eight. How did he get in?"

Garvey's laugh was in the tenor range. "The sign is for you

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tourists. We try to scare you out of here at a decent hour so you don't get hurt climbing around in the dark. Any local knows a dozen different ways to get inside. The perimeter wall's only a few stones high in places. The old friary's always been a popular spot for kids learning to smoke and drink and for couples. Courting couples, you might call them."

We started up the hill to the ruins, a much steeper climb than the one we'd made from the pub. There was no path, just very lush grass, well dotted with cow patties though no perpetrators were visible. At this range the jumbled ruins had resolved themselves into two main structures and a fringe of minor ones. An almost intact square tower dominated the ruin on the left, identifying it as a former church. The structure to our right must have been the friary. It looked to have a bigger footprint than the church's, and one or two of its surviving walls were almost as tall as the square tower.

"Speaking of courting couples," I said between breaths, "was there any talk about Tim McKinney and Margaret Mullin?"

It was an idea I'd been kicking around since the girl had bolted at the mention of McKinney's name.

"Not before his death," Garvey said. "But afterwards, yes. Maggie Mullin's always been a quiet girl, a fey girl. But since Tim died she's gotten almost strange with it. That started people asking themselves whether she hadn't been sweet on Tim. If she had been, it could answer another big question, of course, which is who Tim was hoping to see that night, if in fact he was up here for a tryst."

"Was he—was the body clothed?"

"Completely. Which ought to put the lie to the story that someone caught him in the act, so to speak. That and the fact that he was struck on the crown of his head, proving he was on his feet at the fatal moment."

When we finally reached the top of the hill, I was surprised to see graves around the ruined church, some of which looked quite new.

"Tim's not buried up here if that's what you're thinking," said Garvey, who had followed my gaze. "He's in his family's plot over in Navin. But this cemetery is still used. You'll see that often in Ireland: new graves around an ancient church. Makes for a peaceful resting place, I always think. The spot you want to see is over there, in the old friary."

The closer we got to the friary, the more ragged it looked. The walls were broken off at random heights and the stones they were built from were quite irregular, gathered rather than quarried. Only around the surviving door and window openings was the

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gray stone finished. Some of these pieces were carved quite elaborately, with twisting vines and flowers.

Garvey guided me into the maze of broken walls, eventually taking me down a little passageway that ended in a cul-de-sac. Here the walls were fairly tall, a dozen feet or more, except for one spot that looked like it had been cleaved by a giant ax, the fissure running almost to the ground.

"He was found right here in this dead end, facing outward." The policeman positioned himself in the exact spot. "The stone fell from up there behind me; you can still see the gap."

I looked around for its final resting place, but there was nothing on the ground bigger than gravel.

"We took it away," Garvey explained. "As evidence, of course, but also to keep it from becoming some ghoul's souvenir or a tourist attraction in its own right. It's the size of a small satchel. Small enough for one man to move and big enough to move one man to the next life."

6.

Garvey and I poked around for a time. I even went so far as to climb up to examine the spot where the fatal stone had rested. I was able to do that because of the rough construction of the wall's back side, which provided a wealth of hand- and footholds. I couldn't see any indication that the murder stone had been jimmied free, but several in the top course were dangerously loose, the lichen-covered mortar having been worn to powder in places by rain and wind.

"I checked the ground carefully for some sign that a ladder had been set there," Garvey observed as I climbed down. "I found none, but then, as you've demonstrated, a reasonably active man wouldn't need a ladder.

"Still, as tempting as it is to treat this as a murder, I just can't bring myself to do it. How could the murderer have known exactly where McKinney would be standing? He had to know that or else scramble along the top of the wall like a squirrel, watching McKinney and waiting for his chance. The thing's impossible."

We were walking back down the hill by then, our view the beautiful farmland of the gently sloping valley.

Garvey was lecturing on: "You could say that little passage was where McKinney and his girl, Maggie or whoever, always had their sex, that he'd naturally wait for her there, but that doesn't really answer. McKinney might have stood anywhere in that alleyway waiting. Or he might have paced. And neither of those would have served. The stone could only have hit him in one spot, and there was no way for any murderer to know that McKinney would stand there, no way for an accomplice to maneuver him into posi-

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tion without giving the game away or being in deadly danger herself when the stone came crashing down."

We paused at the gate to take a last look up the hill. I said, "Three months ago it was March. Not the best time of year for having outdoor sex."

Garvey laughed his tenor laugh. "Our Junes may be cooler than yours are in America, but our Marches are milder. And our facilities for conducting illicit affairs are less numerous. But I see your point. For me, though, a greater objection is that the whole hill is sacred ground."

"That didn't stop the friars in the old days, from what I've been told."

"Oh yes? Is that something else you picked up in the pub?"

We started down the road toward town.

"No. I heard it on my way home last night. From an unfriendly guy big enough to juggle satchel-sized stones."

"That could only be Jimmy Kerrigan. He's another one who's been acting strangely since McKinney's death. And, though it's a sin to repeat gossip, his name was once linked with Breda McKinney's."

"Once?"

"They've not been seen so much as smiling at one another since her husband died."

Three months is a long time to fast, I heard Breda say. *Makes a woman less choosy.*

We paused at the crossroads to let a tour bus roar past. When the noise died away, I asked, "Who around here would know the old stories about the friary, the history and the legends?"

"Once upon a time, I would have recommended the dead Timothy. Now he's part of the history of the place himself, poor man. Try Sean O'Rooney."

"Little guy who smokes a pipe?"

"The same. He owns an antique shop, The Cobwebs, it's called, on down the road here almost to the bottom of the hill."

The front doors of the pub burst open before we were halfway across the road. Mullin charged out and headed straight for me, spitting his words out ahead of him.

"Bastard! Bastard! What did you do to my little girl? What did you say to her? What do you mean, stirring up things you don't understand? You bastard!"

Most of that speech was delivered over Garvey's broad shoulder. If it hadn't been for him, Mullin would have had me under the wheels of the next tour bus.

The breeze was blowing the Mullin comb-over straight up like an open lid, exposing his pink scalp and making him look more pathetic than threatening. And suddenly he was sounding

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pathetic, all his anger spent, the small, ice-blue eyes he'd passed on to his daughter welling up with tears.

"How long does she have to be punished for one mistake? For a mistake of the heart? For a simple human weakness? Tell me that."

"Nobody's punishing her," Garvey crooned. He'd gone from blocking the pub owner to propping him up.

"I'm taking her away. To my sister's in Kilkenny. I should have done that months ago. I see that now."

"That's probably for the best," Garvey said, still using his nursery voice. He looked over his shoulder at me, then jerked his head in the direction of the High Street.

I took the hint and hurried down the hill.

7.

Though he'd caused my heart rate to spike, I was in Mullin's debt. The sobbing father had moved a rumor into the fact column: his daughter and McKinney had been lovers. Breda had told me that she would have preferred a skirt-chasing husband to a ghost-chasing one. That she could handle the former. I wondered now *how* she had handled him.

I was also thinking of something Garvey had said. That the killing couldn't have been murder because there was no way a murderer could know exactly where McKinney would stand during his last moment on earth. It was the same point the man I was hurrying to see, Sean O'Rooney, the little antiques dealer, had made during the bull session in the pub.

Now I was twisting that idea around, or rather, standing it on its head. Given as a working premise that McKinney's death had been murder, it followed that the murderer *had* somehow lured him to an exact spot in the old friary. The thing couldn't have worked any other way. So my job was to figure out exactly how it had been done.

If I was lucky, figuring out how would also tell me who. The reason real murderers seldom used the kind of elaborate murder method that Dorothy Sayers had delighted in dreaming up, besides the fact that most murderers were too stoned or drunk or mad with rage, was that a complicated scheme, once figured out, could point the way back to the murderer as effectively as any blood trail.

I found O'Rooney's little house very near the River Boyne. The Cobwebs took up the whole first story, though it might only have counted as half a story, the ceiling of the shop was that low. Low and heavily beamed, the black hand-hewn timbers making me bob my head repeatedly as the proud owner showed me around the place.

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O'Rooney remembered me from Mullin's, though we hadn't exchanged a word there. "Mr. Keane from America," he said when he was back in his Windsor chair behind his workbench counter. "Your name in the Gaelic would be O'Cathain, roughly, 'son of battle.' It was anglicized first as O'Cahan, later as Kane and Keane."

"How do you happen to know that?"

"It's one of my hobbies, genealogy." As near as I could tell, he was dressed in the very tweeds he'd worn the night before, though his flat cap was missing, revealing him to be as bald as the sobbing pub owner. "And heraldry, too, you know. It's good for business. Americans especially are always wonderfully impressed when I rattle off a little of their family history. If you don't mind my saying so, you Yanks are a woefully uninformed group."

He had a pipe filled by then, a well-browned meerschaum. While he was lighting it, I started in.

"I came by to ask you about another of your interests. I'm told you're an expert on local folklore."

"So I am. But it's a broad topic. Is there something particular you're interested in? I can see there is by the light in your eyes. If you were as keen on antiques, I'd have a banner day."

"I'm interested in any ghost stories connected with the old friary."

"Are you now? Why would that be?"

"I'm a ghost chaser." I tried to remember the exact words Breda had used to describe her husband. "It's my great dream to see one."

I was curious to know whether Breda had told me the truth, whether O'Rooney would pick up on the echo of McKinney's reputation. He did.

"A dangerous thing to want, Mr. Keane, if you'll pardon the impertinence. The dead past is a dangerous thing to poke at generally."

I knew that from bitter experience, but I didn't say so. I wondered instead about O'Rooney's free advice. Thanks to Mullin, he knew that I was staying with Breda. So he might have understood my real interest in the friary. He might even have guessed the secret intent of my question. If he had, he kept his guess to himself.

"Two stories come to mind," he said. "One involves a headless abbot, the other a poor murdered girl."

"I'll take the murdered girl."

O'Rooney puffed on his pipe for a time. I had an idea by then how the ceiling beams had gotten black. Judging by his expression, the smoke signals meant "I thought you might."

"She's a legend only, not an historical fact. According to this tale, a beautiful local girl named Catriona caught the eye of one of the

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friars in the abbey. This was way back in the fourteenth century, when many of the religious weren't as chaste as we expect them to be today.

"The friar was so besotted with Catriona that he lured the girl into the friary after Mass one day and had his way with her. Then, fearing exposure, for Catriona was no girl to be threatened into silence, he killed her and buried her under the friary's stone floor.

"But his secret came out in the end, as murder always will. Catriona's ghost saw to that. It walked the halls of the friary until the bloody friar went mad and confessed."

"And the ghost still walks?"

"Not that I've ever heard. So it would be a real feather in your cap, were you to be the one to see her. The making of your reputation as a ghost chaser."

8.

On my way back to the haunted friary, I looked in at the tiny Guarda station and was told that Constable Garvey was off taking a report on a missing horse. I decided I wouldn't wait for him to get back, that I couldn't wait for him, in fact. I was too excited to even take my time as I made my way up the hill to the friary's entrance gate. Before I'd reached it, my double-time pace had reopened half-healed blisters from my African campaign.

I'd seen how the thing had been worked, and I was in a lather to verify my guess. Garvey had said that there was no way an accomplice could have lured McKinney to the murder spot without exposing herself to danger when the stone fell. But there was a way. The killer had used Tim McKinney's well-known passion for ghosts as bait, if I was right, if something about the passageway in which McKinney had died was true.

A half-dozen laughing German tourists were coming down the grassy hill as I went up. I was alone on the summit, but down the far slope a farmer was letting a herd of black cows through a second gate in the perimeter wall. He waved to me, and I waved back.

Then I hurried to the spot where Breda's husband had died. I stood there, as Garvey had done an hour earlier, and took in the view. There was nothing very interesting down the passage and no view at all to my right, thanks to the intact wall. The wall on my left had a break I'd noted on my first visit, when the cleft had suggested the handiwork of a giant ax. That cleft afforded a very narrow view of the interior of the friary, specifically of a fairly intact wall supported in part by the remains of a chimney. This wall also had a gap, a square one near the top. Through it I could see a second interior wall. Set high in that second wall was a narrow doorway. At one time, it must have connected two second-story rooms, but the rooms were gone, leaving only this headstone-shaped hole

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as their memorial. The doorway was perfectly aligned with the square gap in the chimney wall, the cleft in the passage wall, and the spot where I stood. If I moved a foot in any direction, I lost sight of it.

I left the passageway at a run and scrambled all over the ruins, looking for a spot where I could get a better view of the floating doorway. It couldn't be seen at all from outside the friary, the exterior walls being too well preserved in that part of the structure. I was able to reach the narrow ground-floor rooms on either side of the wall that held the doorway. In either room I could crane my neck and see the opening, but it was badly foreshortened. Certainly neither room offered as complete a view as the one I'd had in McKinney's passage.

Which was exactly the result I wanted, the result I needed to verify my theory. The end of the passage offered the only clear view of a precise spot in the ruin. McKinney had been drawn to the end of the passage because of that view, because someone had told him that at a certain hour—midnight, probably—the view would include a ghost. And not just any ghost. The spirit of Catriona the fair, not seen in five hundred years.

Examining the floating doorway presented something of a challenge. I tried a little rock scaling, as I'd done on the passage wall under Garvey's supervision, but the interior walls had been built with more care and offered fewer handholds.

After two unsuccessful assaults, I was ready for another approach, and I remembered the farmer who'd been letting his cows in to eat the friary grass. He was still at the gate, urging along some stragglers.

I ran down the hill to him, getting his full attention and then some. Still, I was polite enough to introduce myself and ask his name—Tutty—before I popped my question: "Do you have a ladder I might borrow?"

Tutty did, a fine aluminum one parked next to a stone barn just beyond the gate. He didn't ask why I wanted it; the fact that I was an American seemed to be a carte blanche explanation for eccentricity. Nevertheless, I babbled something about wanting to check some stone carving. In exchange for that lie, Tutty—a man whose skin had been reddened extremely by the same weather that was eroding the friary—offered to help me carry the ladder up the hill. Together we placed it beneath the vestigial doorway. With the farmer securing the ladder's footing, I started up.

I wasn't really looking for physical evidence, though I badly needed some. I wanted to verify that it had really taken two people to work the murder scheme, one to dislodge the stone that had killed McKinney and one to distract the victim by appearing in the doorway as the ghost of Catriona. Actually, I was secretly hop-

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ing that I was wrong, that no one, not even a woman as petite as Breda McKinney, could have found a footing in the old wall, that her husband had been distracted by the promise of a ghost only and not by the appearance of one.

But when I reached the top of the ladder, I found that there was ample footing in the doorway, which was floored with broad, almost-green stones. I also found the physical evidence that I hadn't been expecting to find. The green stones in the base of the doorway, the stones on which the false Catriona had to have stood, had been secured with a grouting of very modern cement, which had barely begun to weather in the three months it had been in place.

I was yanked from my thoughts by the sight of a man hurrying across the gravel space directly beneath the ledge I was studying. It was Tutty, the farmer who was supposed to be holding my ladder. He glanced over his shoulder just before he disappeared around a corner, and his expression suggested that he'd just seen Catriona herself, or perhaps the headless abbot.

I looked down the ladder and saw someone very alive and very large. It was Breda McKinney's one-time beau, Jimmy Kerrigan.

9.

Kerrigan shook the ladder. "Come along down now. We've a visit to make."

I considered scrambling up into the old doorway and pushing the ladder away. But there was no telling when the next load of tourists would happen by. And no way to stop Kerrigan from replacing the ladder and coming up to get me.

So I started down, the ladder rock-steady under the big man's hands.

"That's fine now," he said when I was on the ground. He wasn't gigantic in the full daylight, but he was big enough, his face broad and heavy-jawed but not unhandsome, the eyes I hadn't been able to make out at our first meeting a brownish green.

He took the ladder down and held it easily at his side with one hand. "Don't want anyone getting hurt, do we?" he asked.

I was thinking about making a run for it when he reached out and grabbed my arm, saying, "We're off, then."

Once we were outside the friary, he tossed the ladder onto the ground. I wouldn't have been surprised if he had tied it into a bow first, my fear having granted him such epic qualities. In reality, his grip on my arm was almost gentle. All the same, I didn't see me shrugging it off.

When we reached the gate at the bottom of the grassy slope, Kerrigan released my arm and put his massive one around my shoulders. We were two pals then, out for a stroll. That disguise

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would only work on people who didn't come within earshot, since I planned to yell for help to the first passerby we met in town.

Kerrigan countered that by not taking us through town. We struck off across the field opposite the friary. There were cows in this field, too, but they wisely made way for my guide, who chatted as we walked.

"Didn't take my advice about the west, did you, Mr. Keane? You missed some sights, let me tell you. The Cliffs of Mohr, say. You not being afraid of heights, you could have done some fine scampering on those. And the Connemara Peninsula. They've whole mountains of stone out there, and the ground around them so rough and wild it makes this little valley of ours look like a doily some grandmother needled up."

"If we're going that far," I said, "we should stop for my car."

I felt Kerrigan's booming laugh through my shoulder, which was jammed against his chest.

"We're not going that far. We've a visit to make, as I said. A meeting to attend. You have, that is."

"Who am I meeting? Tim McKinney?"

Neither of us laughed at that or spoke again for a time. I could see by then that we were circling the town, Kerrigan's intention evidently being to approach it from a safer side. Sure enough, shortly after we'd crossed the Newgrange road, we headed up into Slane, into a crooked lane I knew fairly well, the lane that held Breda McKinney's house.

Outside her door, Kerrigan released my shoulders and seized my arm again. This time there was nothing gentle about his grip.

"Listen," he said. In the filtered light of the lane, his eyes had lost their brownish shading and looked quite green. As green and as hard as the stones of the haunted doorway. "You're going inside to talk with herself. I'm staying out here, but don't even think about slipping out the back. I'll be watching through the window. If I see you leave the parlor, I'll be on you faster than the next lie can come to your lips.

"First, though, there's something I want to say. I love Breda. I loved her when she was married to my friend Tim, though it damned my soul to do it. Tim's death should have freed us, freed Breda and me, but it didn't. Breda could only see our sin after that, not our love. She's been punishing herself for that sin ever since. And me with her. You're the latest punishment for me. The only reason you have a tooth left in your head is that I intend to stand my punishment like a man, to say every *Ave* of my penance and so get through to the end of it.

"Now go in there and talk to her. And mind what I said about bolting."

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10.

Breda was dressed like a widow today, in a black sweater and slacks. At her neck was a circular silver pin that bore the spiral design I'd seen over and over again at the Celtic tomb in Newgrange. Her black hair was flowing freely again and looked like a nun's veil against her very pale face.

"It's nearly eleven, Owen," she said. We were standing on opposite ends of her hooked rug, facing each other like fighters before the bell. "Time to check out."

"So to speak."

She let that one pass. "Whatever have you been up to this morning?"

She had to know the answer to that, since she'd known where to send her trained ape to nab me. But I played along. "I've been solving your husband's murder. It was murder, by the way. Tim was lured up to the old friary by the promise of a ghost, so you were right about the murder weapon being something mystical. And it wasn't just any ghost. It was one so rare that it would have established his reputation as a ghost chaser."

"Lured by who?"

I shrugged. "Some drinking buddy." I had a candidate in mind: the man whose grip I could still feel around my left biceps. I could easily picture Kerrigan slipping McKinney the tall tale, explaining that he'd been up to the ruins with some willing girl when Catriona had appeared and scared them both out of the mood. If McKinney had even needed that much convincing.

"And your husband didn't die disappointed. He saw his ghost just before he was killed. That is, he saw his murderer's accomplice, a woman, maybe done up in white, floating in an old doorway twenty feet above the ground."

"You surely don't suspect me of that, Owen? You of all people."

"Me of all people."

"Why? Why would I do it?"

I started to glance toward the window Kerrigan was steaming up and checked myself, afraid that even a stray glance might draw him inside. "To be free of McKinney," I said.

"We've divorce now in Ireland. We don't need to kill our spouses to be free of them. And don't say it was for money. There was no money. Tim's uncle's illness saw to that. This house has always been mine, a legacy from my mother. And don't say it was for the insurance, either, for there wasn't any of that. Though Tim spoke of insurance often over those last few days. The idea of it seemed to be haunting him. I've wondered since if he hadn't had some premonition of his death. But he took none out, I checked."

I decided that she was trying to distract me with all the talk of money and insurance. And I wouldn't be distracted. "How about

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jealousy for a motive? I've found out that Tim was cheating on you. Suppose you found out three months back? Would that be motive enough?"

"Timmy cheating?" Breda asked, almost hopeful. "Who with?"

"Margaret Mullin."

I thought Breda's laugh would bring Kerrigan charging in. It was that loud and it had that much pain in it.

"Maggie? That simple thing? You must be daft. She and Tim were like cousins. Wasn't Tim's uncle Maggie's godfather and her father's partner? Weren't Tim and Maggie raised together almost? Years back, Uncle Seamus and Mullin tried to push them together, but nothing happened. It would have been better for Tim if something had, if he had fallen in love with Maggie and married her. Then he wouldn't have been cheated out of his share of the pub."

"Your husband's uncle was Mullin's partner?"

"Yes, Seamus Carlin, Tim's mother's brother."

The white-haired man in the old photo in Mullin's house. "How was your husband cheated?"

"He wasn't, really. That's only my anger talking. Tim was supposed to inherit half of the pub. That's what Uncle Seamus always said. But the poor man's last illness left a mountain of bills and no money in the bank. Tim had no choice but to sell his interest in the pub. Mullin gave him more than a fair price and kept Tim on as barman, but it was a cruel blow still. Tim was never the same man afterward. Not to me or anyone else. Our troubles all started then."

"That's when you turned to Kerrigan."

I think I hurt her worse with that than I had with the accusation of murder.

"You of all people," she said again. "My champion. Thinking the worst of me." She covered her face with her hands and started to sway slightly. "What have I done?"

I was asking myself the same question. I'd finally understood why Breda had taken me into her bed. It wasn't just for company or for sex. It wasn't even just as a penance, for herself or for Kerrigan. It was because, on that first night, during our long talk by the fire, I'd described solving a mystery in Africa. She'd set me the task of solving a mystery for her, not by asking me to do it but simply by sending me up to the pub to hear about it. And I'd ended up accusing her, as everyone else in the village had done. Me of all people, her somewhat slow champion.

I gently drew her hands away from her face. "Tell me what your husband said about insurance before he died."

"What? Nothing really. I woke up one night and he was sitting up beside me, muttering the word insurance like it had come to him in a dream. A day or two later, I happened upon him just

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hanging up the phone. He'd only say he'd been talking to an insurance company, but not what they'd been talking about. After he died, I found a list of insurance companies with check marks against some of the names. I called them all, but none had issued him a policy. He must only have been after quotes or something."

"Or something," I repeated.

The front door opened. Through the narrow opening I could see Jimmy Kerrigan and a second man who had one of Kerrigan's arms pinned behind his back. It was Constable Garvey.

"I heard about your little hike with Jimmy here," the policeman said. "One of our shut-ins saw most of it through her window. I thought I'd better come down and see how you were. Will we be discussing charges at all?"

"Yes," I said, "but not against Kerrigan. You'd better get up to the pub and stop Mullin before he takes his daughter away."

11.

As it turned out, Garvey only just made it. Mullin had his daughter packed in the car and ready to go when the constable trotted up. Mullin then tried to drag Maggie back inside the pub, but with Kerrigan as his backup, Garvey had little trouble separating the girl from her father and questioning her. I sat in.

We had our talk in the pub's dining room and photo gallery. It wasn't necessary for the constable to trick Maggie or break her down. Her father had frightened her thoroughly, and she was more than ready to talk.

She told us that Seamus Carlin hadn't died deep in debt, as Tim McKinney and the rest of the village had been told. Carlin had had an insurance policy set aside to pay his last bills and secure his half of the pub for his nephew. But Carlin's executor, Mullin, had hidden the policy away in order to swindle McKinney while pretending to be his benefactor. Somehow McKinney had gotten on the scent of that policy. When Mullin learned that the wronged man was calling insurance companies, he'd worked out a plan to kill him. The pub owner had whispered the ghost story into McKinney's ear. Maggie herself had played Catriona, told by her father beforehand that it was a joke and afterward that it was a joke gone bad.

She'd long suspected the truth about that night, but had been afraid to speak.

Later that day Constable Garvey stopped by as I was stowing my bag in my rental car in the lane outside the Hill of Slane Bed and Breakfast.

"Leaving so soon, Mr. Keane? You solve our mystery for us,

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secure my promotion to sergeant, and then ride off like that masked fellow on the television?"

"Heigh-ho, Silver," I said, slamming the trunk closed.

"You'll be pleased to hear that Mullin has confessed. Not much point in him holding out after all Maggie told us. It was clever of her dad to pretend to admit to an affair between the girl and McKinney while he was attacking you this morning. Fooled me, I must admit."

"He had to have an excuse for taking her away," I said. "He couldn't trust her any longer. She was too close to cracking."

"Do you suppose he would have hurt Maggie? Silenced her for good, I mean, his own daughter?"

"I don't know."

Garvey sighed. "I don't suppose we ever will know. I took a walk up to the friary and saw that cement work you found in the old doorway. A fine job of masonry. But why did Mullin go to that length? The promise of Catriona alone would have been enough to get Tim in the fatal spot. Mullin didn't have to provide a show."

"The promise would have gotten McKinney there, but would it have distracted him while Mullin was tipping the stone? That had to have made some noise, even if Mullin had had the stone propped up and ready. So Mullin needed a diversion, and to get it, he was willing to risk his daughter's neck. To me, that suggests that she was also at risk today."

Garvey's yellow smile faded out for a moment and then returned. "But I've forgotten to tell you something else I found up there, something you missed: a fat eyebolt stuck in the stone halfway up one side of the doorway. Put there by Mullin to secure a safety line for his daughter. He was looking out for her, you see. So maybe he wouldn't have harmed her after all."

"You're too sentimental to be a policeman," I said.

He laughed. "In New York, maybe. But here . . ."

We looked down toward the valley Kerrigan had compared to a grandmother's doily, to the truncated view of the valley offered by the open end of the lane. At that moment the view included a couple walking hand-in-hand, a courting couple Garvey might have called the mismatched pair, the giant man and the tiny woman.

"Things seem to have worked out for the best," I said, managing to sound cool and indifferent to my own ear.

But not to Garvey's. "Who's too sentimental for this line of work? Safe home, Mr. Keane." ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

GUILTY

by Luis Adrián Betancourt

Translated from the Spanish by Donald A. Yates

Cuban writer Luis Adrián Betancourt has been for some forty years one of the most important contributors to and supporters of the crime-fiction genre in his country. He is the author of many crime novels and mystery short stories, all published in either Cuba or Spain. "Guilty" is his first work to be translated into English. Mr. Betancourt is currently at work on a P.I. novel set in Cuba in the nineteen twenties.

He did not like traveling by train because train trips were slow and boring. They brought back sad memories of farewells, absences, and inevitable emotional distress. In his teeming recall, the train evoked a tangled blend of distances and sleeplessness. All in all, an unpleasant experience.

But this time it would be different. He was coming back. Ignoring the hours, the miles, the stops, he was returning home, to the place where waiting for him would be Rosario, anguished over the lost years spent alone and deserted, Chela, well along toward becoming a young woman, unsuited now to a child's dress, with her hair pulled back into a bun, and Ivan, with more curiosity than feeling for the father he didn't remember and who, after so many years, was returning to his home.

They all were wondering what their lives would be like from now on living together. Antonio himself did not have a clear idea of his immediate future. He needed to sit down with them and humbly, without omitting any details, tell them the true story of that nightmare and ask them if, in spite of everything, he deserved another chance.

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Soon after passing under the overhead crossings on the outskirts of Havana, it began to drizzle. Just as it did on that afternoon when a rainfall coincided with the funeral of Pancho Vasallo. The gravediggers had drunk a whole bottle of Bacardi and stumbled through the mud, cursing the weather and their task.

The sky was an unbroken gray. It had been raining gently and without letup for hours, like tears falling from above. Only the deceased man's family and the two rural policemen on duty remained to the very end, unaffected by the rain that soaked them. Amalia had wept for some time, tormented by the thought that she was responsible for that tragedy and inconsolable over the loss of her beloved father.

Vicente, the agronomist, gave the eulogy, taking only five minutes to say that the man whom they now covered with damp soil had been, above all else, generous and a good friend.

By then, the killer had confessed. It was a simple matter for the authorities—a complete and spontaneous statement, leaving no doubts. Antonio meekly admitted his guilt. At moments it seemed that he had no interest in defending himself.

There was no need to waste time with interviews or questioning. The weapon had not been found, and no one suggested looking for it. Antonio was the only one to mention it, when he gave his statement, saying he had thrown it into the river. No one ever attempted to determine if Vasallo had been killed by a bullet fired from an old Parabelum. The confession eliminated any need to be concerned about proof.

The motive emerged from the testimony of witnesses present, all of whom repeated the same series of tedious facts. Their statements were so similar that a single one of them would have sufficed to satisfy the needs of the investigation.

The trial was carried out promptly, and since the crime was so recent and the victim so widely respected, a sentence of twenty years seemed fitting to everyone except Rosario and her children.

Standing as his sentence was read, Antonio learned with little surprise that he would spend the next twenty years behind bars, far from his family and his town. His gaze cast down, biting his lip, he came to the understanding that there would be many blank pages ahead in his life and that he would experience that death in life that is called solitude. He also did some figuring. By the time that he ceased to be State Inmate 33455, on his release, he would be fifty-three years old, his hair turned gray, and his body weakened. But in this he was mistaken.

After hearing his sentence, he was given a few minutes to say goodbye at the door of his house, while the dogs howled mournfully, as if they understood the role of those accompanying strangers. When he was leaving, Antonio said only one final thing:

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"Wait for me."

"We'll wait for you," his wife replied. And she embraced him. She could offer him no encouragement, for she could feel none for herself. The children remained asleep even at the last kiss. They had no way of knowing what that farewell meant.

Standing on the train platform, Antonio took a long, anguished look at the town, as if he wanted to preserve the image of that place in a corner of his memory.

That day the train was on time. The villagers whispered to each other as the prisoner shuffled by. His head was bowed, his hands bound. One of the soldiers helped him onto the train. The other one offered him a cigarette. His face looked out from the coach window until he was lost from sight.

Now, so many years later, the countryside had changed. That may have been the reason the trip back seemed to take so long. The soldiers with him were relaxed, giving little attention to keeping an eye on him.

They were almost there now. Antonio closed his eyes and remembered the morning many years earlier when he had first arrived in that town. It was July and the hives were full of decanting honey and the *tomeguines* were in full bloom in the fields and on the floor of the pine forests.

He found her strolling amidst the hovering bees and the flowers. He watched her come and go, fascinated by her fleeting smile. He attempted a flattering remark that made the girl smile again, and Antonio knew then that he would remain to live in that town for many years, perhaps for the rest of his life. They were married. There were happy times and others not so happy.

"I would have liked to start all over again," he wrote to her from his prison cell, "and then I would not have wasted a single moment at your side. No one understands what he has until he loses it."

It was something he had discovered when he least expected to. When it was too late to act on that understanding and he was being taken away on a train with only a one-way ticket.

Rosario could not bear to go to the station, but she knew the time when the train would leave and the sound of the departure whistle confirmed it. That night she received an unexpected visitor. Lorenzo Puente indicated that he was there to offer her assistance. She reacted with distrust, suspecting that he was intent on taking advantage of the situation. He did not rate favorably in her estimation.

Lorenzo had not been a particularly good friend of Antonio. He had never wanted to give him a job on the Vasallo ranch. It was easy to see that the nature of their relationship was based on casual circumstances and shared interests, but in no way was it a

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true friendship. It was rather that life had led them down similar paths of parties, drinking, and casual women. In truth, they had been more like accomplices than friends. The last thing she found out about that superficial connection had ultimately turned into a public scandal.

Rosario was embarrassed by what people were saying. Antonio wanted to save the marriage, begged her forgiveness, and in the end she once again forgave him. She said her reason was the children, who were innocent of any blame. They decided to work to keep the family intact at whatever cost. But for now there was nothing he could do. The matter of Pancho Vasallo's daughter did not emerge in Antonio's confessions and he persistently denied any suggestion that it was relevant. But the death of the old man indicated otherwise.

In view of all this she cautiously let Lorenzo speak his piece.

"I don't want people saying that just because of a drunken argument I could desert my close friend in his hour of need. Let me help you."

Rosario asked for some time to consider his offer and wrote a letter to her husband filled with doubts and anxieties. The reply took two long months to arrive, during which time she refused to accept any help. Finally, Antonio's answer came, urging her to agree without questions or hesitation to what Lorenzo was proposing. He said that she should accept the offer of help as something she rightfully deserved, but that in all other respects she should keep her distance from Lorenzo.

"I owe you an explanation," Antonio added, and that would not be the last time he would leave her perplexed over an explanation that was not forthcoming.

"You owe me two," she replied, alluding to Amalia.

Lorenzo took charge of the family's debts, day-to-day expenses, and other matters such as the children's schooling and medical care, the upkeep of the house, and other emergencies that unexpectedly arose.

At no time did Lorenzo try to take advantage of his role as a benefactor, and never did he attempt to play on the woman's helplessness for his own purposes, even when circumstances seemed propitious. Nonetheless, throughout the neighborhood there circulated dark rumors, gossip, wagers, surveillance behind shutters, all nurtured by the desire to discover what mysterious reason was behind the rancher's generosity.

Even the most distracted of townspeople wondered why that proud and lustful neighbor was making such a cult out of friendship. No one had ever seen that sentimental side of Lorenzo.

The gossip increased. Rosario learned about all of the suspicions and assumptions and patiently put up with the constant spying.

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She tried to protect the children from the rumors, but at times people came to call on her and report the latest lie. On other occasions, it was the children themselves who came home with questions that were hard to answer.

On several occasions, Rosario received terrible anonymous letters, whose offensive content was aimed at both her and Antonio. In a large scrawled script, the first of the messages assured her that her husband had killed because of another woman, and she would be well advised to pay him back with similar currency. The second letter was a warning from someone who was waiting for Antonio's return so that he could administer his own justice, since that meted out by the court was too lenient and did not demand an eye for an eye. Despite the seriousness of the matter, the pages were burned in Rosario's fireplace without her having reported them to the authorities. The important thing was for her to alert her husband in one of her letters. But he replied that it was nothing more than the provocations they had to endure, possibly organized by old Vasallo's relatives.

Rosario dedicated more than one sleepless night to trying to find a way out of her situation. She was prepared to make any sacrifice for her children, but she saw no other path of action than the one she was following, which was causing so much cruel speculation. She ended up going along with the arrangement, trusting to her own integrity and the approval that her husband had given her.

From his cell Antonio managed to keep informed of virtually everything that was going on. In time, he set up a rapid and dependable means of communication that involved a series of individuals: a lobster fisherman from Batabanó, a truck driver, and the firemen on a train. He wrote lengthy letters that tried to capture features of the unattainable reality of home, that tried to control it and make decisions from his remote position, all in an effort to overcome the consequences of his separation. Even though he shared in Rosario's suffering and wondered about the strength of her resistance, he urged her to wait for him, to trust in him, and to continue accepting what Lorenzo offered. He explained that his generosity was not motivated by charity or the desire to do a favor, but rather by something associated more with a duty, the carrying out of a sworn promise. Just what that promise was he could not reveal until the day when, free to speak, he could tell her in detail what was involved. Antonio also wrote a lot about his intimate feelings and made repeated promises of loyalty and eternal love. This made her cry.

Lorenzo religiously kept the vow that he had made to the prisoner. He never failed to carry out what he promised, nor did he deny any of Rosario's requests. This continued each day, each

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month, each year up until the morning when he awoke with the realization that he did not have long to live.

It was an old condition that at times he was able to forget, but that suddenly would reappear and affect him severely. It was winter, and that season helped to speed up death's work. The moment arrived when he understood that there would be no reprieve, no doctor, no medicine, no miracle cure or accident that could save him.

After a long night of feverish reflection, he had his wife call a clergyman, an old family friend who had married them and baptized their children, a Franciscan priest who came immediately to tend to his soul, since there was no hope for his body.

"Father," he said, "I feel that I am dying and I don't want to go without confessing my sins."

The priest listened to him patiently. At first there were everyday issues, minor sins, the Devil's little tricks, but then he went on to capital sins, mentioning pride, anger, and lust. Then he said:

"I have a great debt before God, and before man. I committed a grave mistake and I scarcely have time left to do anything about it."

The proximity of death terrified him, but worse was facing it burdened with guilt. He scarcely had the strength to make that accusation of himself. The dying man's wife placed a white cloth on the table and the priest laid out on it the objects of the extreme unction: the cross, the candles, the saucer with the bread and the cotton, the holy water. The priest's words were not enough. He needed someone other than God to hear him.

"My son, you have good reason, but it is not in my power to help you. Not even your wife could be a party to what you have told me."

The priest explained to him the necessary secrecy of his confession. It was intimate and inviolable even if it involved a crime in the eyes of the law. Death came before the dying man had ceased to protest. Thus it was that Lorenzo's carefully guarded secret remained forever with the Franciscan. If human justice had been as benevolent as that of God, he would have confessed much earlier and to a court of law.

Vicente the agronomer gave the eulogy. Since he didn't know the deceased very well, he had to make inquiries concerning his person and he was careful about the words he used. Based on what he was told, he offered this observation:

"If death is seen as a punishment of God, only Lorenzo will know which of his sins provoked that blind rage. I merely want to give this farewell by acknowledging at least one of his virtues: silence."

Rosario felt abandoned now for a second time. She wrote to

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Antonio telling him about the unfortunate death of Lorenzo and asking him what he would suggest that she do about this new crisis.

For the first time, Antonio reread his wife's letter several times. The news of Lorenzo's death was unbelievable, but there it was, clearly described, with details from the funeral that left no room for doubt. He did not sleep that night, and the next morning he requested an interview with the prison counselor. The counselor, Lieutenant Ramos, was familiar with his case. As a consequence of several previous discussions between Ramos and Antonio and the examination of his file, there was a pending application for a reduction of sentence for inmate 33455. It was supported by the prisoner's exemplary behavior over the period of more than ten years. Contrasting with that, however, was the fact that Ramos had never been able to understand that inmate's refusal to speak openly. When he committed the crime, he had no previous record and a reputation as a peaceful man, which matched his behavior in prison. When the regime of Fulgencio Batista collapsed in 1958, the word reached Antonio through a group of prisoners who came to him announcing their liberation. One of them was carrying the keys to all of the cells and the locks were soon opened. The few guards who remained on duty were paralyzed with fear. It was now just a matter of walking out of prison, into the street, and finding liberty. There was no longer a Batista, no longer a government.

All of the other inmates made their escape, but Antonio felt compelled to honor something above and beyond those events. He remained behind, stretched out on his bed, together with an old man who refused to leave because his sentence was nearly over and he didn't want to endanger his release with new infractions.

When his new custodians arrived, they found him there, meekly waiting, just as he had been the day when he held out his hands to be handcuffed after confessing to the murder. At that time, Ramos was an army private who met Antonio when he worked for him in the prison kitchen. Even then, Ramos found it hard to believe that Antonio had taken a man's life.

His behavior had always been impeccable, the only exception being when he was involved in a violent incident when he was trying to prevent a killing behind bars.

Lieutenant Ramos had had frequent conversations with inmate 33455, whom he called by his first name. The reason for the murder was a constant topic, since Ramos had trouble squaring Antonio's character with the facts in his case. He had always been sceptical about prisoners' claims of innocence. They rarely accepted any guilt, and in most cases claimed to be victims themselves. They were in prison because of a miscarriage of justice, or

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some unfortunate coincidence or error. At other times they refused to talk about what sent them to prison just to show that they were tough and thick-skinned. But when Antonio assured him that he had no reason to feel repentant, he believed him.

At the time he began to attend the therapy sessions for men convicted of homicide, Ramos realized immediately that Antonio was an exception. The group was very diverse, and the personalities varied widely. There were morally depraved persons, others given to uncontrolled aggression, and those who were the victims of circumstances, like the man who came home drunk and found his wife with a lover, or a man driven to despair by a blackmailer, or one who had been humiliated in front of his woman, or a peasant who could not stand by when authorities came to evict his parents from their home and burn it to the ground.

Antonio clearly did not fit into the therapy group, although he adapted to it and the others ended up calling him "the secretary" because his handwriting was good and he agreed to write letters and petitions for them. Antonio's conviction was based on a common situation, a dispute over a woman, yet he continued to be devoted to his wife and children.

So when on that morning Ramos heard Antonio insist that he was innocent, it was like the confirmation of an old suspicion. But there was no easy way to deal with it. Or was it possible that Antonio was simply echoing the protests of his fellow inmates, who all swore that they were unjustly convicted?

Antonio scarcely offered any support for his claim of innocence. All he did was tell Ramos that if he examined the case against him carefully he would soon see where the truth lay.

The officer asked to hear Antonio's version. In response, Antonio alluded vaguely to how he had gone to the Vasallos' celebration and how, after a stupid argument, he had decided to get his horse and leave. It was when he had already started for home that he heard the gunshot.

The account seemed too simple to be believed. Moreover, there was no explanation for his ten-year-long silence. Antonio said that he became confused when he was arrested and saw no way of defending himself, that he was very young and the authorities refused to listen to him, that everything happened so quickly and so he resigned himself to his fate. But now, he said, with so much time gone by and his children now of an age to begin asking questions, he wanted to take steps toward allowing the truth to be known.

Nonetheless, Ramos sensed that the man was lying, or that at least he was offering an incomplete account. He promised Antonio that he would see that the investigation was reopened according to regulations. They took him to the prison's administrative office;

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there also he had to answer questions. He kept to his story without adding or eliminating details, as if it all was a memorized statement. He made a formal declaration. The decision was that in two weeks he would be returned to "the scene of the events." An official investigator was named who began making the first new inquiries. Time elapsed and the faulty memory of witnesses complicated the process.

The death of Pancho Vasallo was now recalled in a series of personal anecdotes, some of them obviously contradictory. It was very hard to find dependable witnesses, and equally difficult to locate family members, since they had in many cases moved away, and in any event were not interested in digging up the past. The only unassailable fact was that no one would be able to bring Pancho Vasallo back.

The victim's immediate family members were no longer in the area. Amalia Vasallo had married and lived abroad and Celso Vasallo could not be found. The death of his father had left him shaken. All of his plans had been destroyed with that one shot and he had thereafter wandered about aimlessly with no permanent home.

The judge from the old trial was now retired and spent his time raising fighting cocks outside town. He remembered the case very well. With one sentence he gave his final judgment: "Let the hearing go ahead, but I don't know what's going to change."

The letter of the law had been observed.

Now, as the train approached, Antonio was thinking ahead to the moment of his arrival. He imagined different ways in which it might occur. The idea of being able to spend a few hours in his town filled him with happiness.

Ramos had promised him that before the new hearing he would take him first to his home and find something else to do while he spent a few hours with his family.

Lulled by the movement of the train, Antonio's thoughts turned back to the fatal evening. The party had gotten into full swing and the dancers were swaying to the rhythm of the music when he arrived dressed in his Sunday best, a fancy cigar lit up and his spirit lifted by a few strong drinks under his belt. The musicians were warmed up and playing at their best, performing a sultry melody:

"Mama, I want to know the place
From where the singers come . . ."

Antonio glanced into the dance hall and saw her immediately. She was off in a corner, talking with Lorenzo, a foreman from the Vasallo ranch, El Paraíso. He knew that that rancher had his eye on Amalia, but he didn't particularly care, or at least that was what he told himself. He was going to turn away and ignore the

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couple, but then it appeared to him that the girl was being harassed and that called for some action. So he made his way across the dance floor, now feeling quarrelsome from the effects of the alcohol.

The rancher was trying to get Amalia to agree to something and she was attempting to turn away when Antonio reached them, now openly aggressive like a prize gamecock. But the girl ignored him also.

Belén, who was a kind of watchdog for the Vasallo family, saw what was happening and went to look for the old man. He gave him the message, adding his own interpretation and saying that it was a family issue that needed to be addressed. He asked Vasallo for permission to intervene, but the old man said that it was his matter to attend to personally.

Rumor had it that the two men had both enjoyed Amalia's favor, but that she had ended things with both of them. The discussion had become heated when Pancho Vasallo arrived. He dealt with the situation in his own way: He slapped Amalia across the face and ordered the two men to leave the party. Lorenzo withdrew immediately. Antonio cursed the old man and said that his treatment of him left an account to be settled.

Pancho Vasallo responded to the threat with an oath: "From now on, as long as I live, you will never set foot on my property."

"I don't have to come here to be with Amalia."

"Then I'll have to go to your home and let Rosario know the kind of husband she has."

"Amalia is your daughter, not your mistress."

"She won't be yours, either, you son of a—"

Suddenly they were struggling. The dancers managed to separate them. Since no blows had been struck, they glared at each other, hurling curses.

"I'm going to settle this with you. And soon!" was the last thing Antonio said before going for his horse. At least, that was what the witnesses recalled.

Belén clapped his hands together over his head and announced that the party was not over, that the night was still young. He called to the musicians to play a lively *guaracha*. The people returned to the dance floor. It was soon after that the gunshot was heard. The men came running out of the dance hall, looking in all directions. They saw Antonio riding off at a trot. They recognized his Stetson hat. They called out to Pancho Vasallo, but he did not answer. They found him sprawled on the paving stones, gravely wounded. Lorenzo ran for his jeep, brought it around, and many arms helped lift the dying man. Lorenzo drove recklessly down a long and winding muddy road. It took almost an hour before he reached the doctor, who, after one glance, said:

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"This man is dead."

The bullet had struck him in the chest and had not exited. Lorenzo, in time, took charge of everything, assumed all the expenses, saying that he did not hold a grudge and that Vasallo's death had put an end to any resentment. Back at the El Paraíso, one of the ranch hands said to Belén:

"It was Antonio."

Someone claimed to have seen him escaping at a gallop. Everyone set out to look for him. The first to arrive, in his jeep, was Lorenzo.

Antonio was prepared to continue their fight, but Lorenzo cut him short.

"They're coming for you. They think you killed Vasallo. But I know you're innocent."

Antonio's first urge was to flee, to go into hiding until the incident could be cleared up. Lorenzo pointed out to him how slow and ineffective justice was, that he couldn't desert his family. What would they live on?

"Unless you could leave them enough money."

"Where would I get money?"

Lorenzo said he could provide it, that he would pay generously for what Antonio gave him, if he was willing to make a sacrifice for his family.

Antonio protested that he was innocent, that it would be just a matter of time before the truth would come out. Lorenzo pointed out that it was a time when justice was hard to come by. Antonio would be dealing with the police and with judges, which was difficult without having money and the type of connections that he himself happened to have.

"I want to make you a proposition."

"Well, I suppose I can listen." Antonio began to adjust his horse's saddle. "But you'd better talk fast."

"It's simple. I'll take on all of your family's problems and you'll confess to the murder."

In case he hadn't understood, Lorenzo added: "I'm paying you a lot for the only thing you have, your freedom."

Antonio thought about his sick mother, his children, the debts and the deprivations of his family.

"And what if you don't do what you promise?"

"Then all you would have to do is tell what you know."

The deal was sealed.

Lorenzo returned home and described to his wife the enormous tragedy.

Antonio resigned himself to being arrested, and understood that it would be a long time before things would be as they had been.

Now the arrangement had ended. Death had put an end to his

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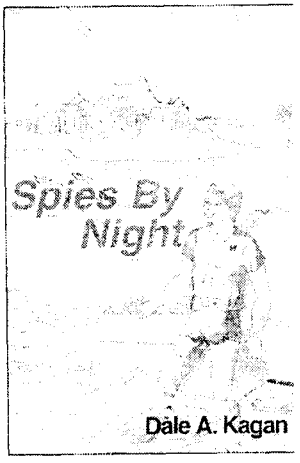
wait. The train began to slow down. After it rounded a curve, Antonio could see the train platform. There was only a small group gathered there, but they were among them. Rosario and Chela were weeping. Ivan stood quietly, his arms crossed.

The train came to a stop. Antonio moved with deliberate slowness. Now every second held profound meaning. He let two old people laden with packages get off, and a couple with two noisy children. Then he helped several nuns with their baggage.

Finally, his feet were on the ground. He breathed a deep sigh and began walking toward his family. They, too, were moving forward to the encounter. Two steps away from their embrace, someone stepped out from behind a pile of boxes and fired. Celso Vasallo had come from far away to fulfill an unjust promise on his father's soul when there was no way to avenge his death, and now his bullet found its mark.

Since it was raining the gravediggers had had a lot to drink and were having problems with their footing and the job at hand. Rosario, Ivan, and Chela, their weeping behind them, stood huddled at the graveside. Few people had come to the funeral service.

Vicente, the agronomer, gave the eulogy. He took only one or two minutes to state that the man whom they were covering with earth had been, in spite of everything, a family man. ●



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Art by Ron Buccalo

THE FRUIT CELLAR

by Joyce Carol Oates

"'Peery.' Does the name mean anything to you?"

"'Perry'? I don't think so."

"'Peery.' 'Lisa Peery.'"

The voice, which was the telephone voice of Shannon's older brother Mark, sounded carefully neutral. So often had Shannon and her brother spoken on the phone during the past eight months—monitoring their father's illness, rapid decline, and death, the funeral arrangements, the funeral, and now the aftermath, in Shannon's numbed imagination a high-piled sludge like the muddy debris following a flood—it took her a moment to realize that Mark's voice was different this morning, somehow. For this was not one of their shared emotions, it was Mark's own, mysterious to her.

"'Lisa Peery.' Now I remember, I think—that little girl? The abducted girl? From the park. I was in high school, my junior year." Shannon had begun to speak rapidly, nervously. She heard her voice with dismay and dislike yet could not restrain herself. "It was in—nineteen eighty-nine? Around this time of year. June."

In a rush of blurred images the banner headlines, the photographs of the ten-year-old child came to her. Memory underlaid with a

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sense of dread, an obscure shame. In that early summer thirteen years before posters and fliers had blossomed everywhere Shannon had looked, glaring-yellow borders and tall black captions like shouts.

MISSING MISSING MISSING

It had been a nightmare season. No child had ever been abducted from Strykersville. Not in the known history of the small city south of Lake Ontario. No child had ever "vanished" from Myrtle Park, a stretch of hilly, partly wooded municipal land through which a deep ravine ran, abutting the rear of the large old properties along Highland Avenue where Shannon and Mark had grown up in the Leigh family house.

Joyce Carol Oates has distinguished herself as a novelist, short story writer, playwright, and poet; and even within prose fiction, her range extends from the literary to several entertainment genres. Readers interested in Ms. Oates's most recent work should look for the novel *The Tattooed Girl* (Ecco Press/'03), the novella, *Rape: A Love Story* (Carroll & Graf /'04), and the short story collection *I Am No One You Know* (Ecco Press '04).

Mark said, "I think you'd better come over here, Shannon. Now."

There was no question what *here* meant.

Shannon, who was staying in Strykersville with relatives, drove across town to Highland Avenue, in the bright gusty air of early June in upstate New York. As recently as the other week, there had been frost on the ground in the early morning; in another week, there might be a heat wave. Returning to Strykersville from her present life was, for Shannon, a return to an unresolved past: Her mood was melancholy, elegiac. This had been true even before her parents' deaths and was doubly true now. She was thinking of how her father had insisted upon living alone for the past several, increasingly difficult years after her mother's death: stubbornly, grimly, yet with a kind of elation. He'd said he would die "on his own turf, on his own terms." He would leave them "everything"—"everything you can lay your hands on." It was a curious choice of language. But then, Mr. Leigh had always spoken, in private moments, in a curious way; he'd alarmed and exasperated and exhausted both his children yet they'd had to concede, he was a courageous, indomitable old man, he'd never lost his pride.

Until the past year Mr. Leigh had been the kind of stoutly energetic older man you call *hale, hearty.* Though a worry to his grown children he was an admired figure to others. The kind of man who swam laps several times a week at the YMCA before having breakfast at the Blue Point Diner where he'd cultivated a reputation as an acerbic "character" with strong opinions on contempo-

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rary America. The kind of man who made a show of "fast-walking" in the neighborhood with the buoyant air of an athlete in training, calling out "Good morning!" to everyone he met. Before retiring at the age of seventy Mr. Leigh had been an aggressively successful real-estate broker in Niagara County; he'd been an officer in the local Chamber of Commerce, and a deacon in the First Presbyterian Church of Strykersville; for four decades he'd been an avid Shriner, and had never missed one of the flamboyant Shriners conventions in Philadelphia. Abruptly after Mrs. Leigh's death he'd begun to lose interest in his public personality; the side of his personality he'd kept private, known only to his family, of secrecy, moodiness, cynicism, began to be predominant. Relatives reported to Shannon and Mark that he'd grown rude to them, refusing their invitations; he'd walked out of the funeral service for an elderly aunt, at which he'd appeared "unshaven, disheveled"; he was drinking; he was becoming something of a recluse in the house on Highland Avenue. Shannon and Mark, who lived, as if by design, in cities approximately equidistant from Strykersville, took turns dutifully visiting him and reported to each other afterward, in painstaking detail. The monitoring of an elderly ailing parent is a cerebral as well as an emotional challenge, like interpreting a tricky poem: You are obliged to decode his most casual remarks, for these are the remarks that are likely to reveal his heart. During Shannon's last visit before Mr. Leigh's final hospitalization, she'd hurriedly called Mark to tell him, "It's like Dad's body is caving in. Like his bones are shrinking and crumbling. He's always stood so tall, held his head so high, now he's shorter than I am. He asked me in this sarcastic voice, 'What are you wearing, stacked shoes?' "

Mr. Leigh was seventy-four at that time. Not really elderly by contemporary standards. Shortly he would learn that the chemotherapy treatments he'd endured for months were having no effect upon his cancer. Shannon had not wanted to tell her brother *I hate him, I'm afraid of him.* For perhaps that wasn't true, entirely. More likely she meant *Why doesn't he love me? Why hasn't he loved me? I've waited so long.*

Shannon turned into the familiar driveway at 38 Highland. It was jarring to see the front lawn overgrown, choked in dandelions. Water-stained newspapers and fliers had been tossed into the unpruned shrubs at the front of the house; each time Shannon saw these she made a note to retrieve them, and each time she forgot. When she and Mark were growing up, Highland Avenue near Myrtle Park was the most prestigious neighborhood in Strykersville. Now, the large old brick and colonial houses were distinctly less impressive. In bright, gusty air the heavy slate roofs and numerous bay windows, the soot-darkened chimneys, exuded an air of subtle dereliction. No one with money cared to live on Highland

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Avenue any longer: The fashion was for newer suburban neighborhoods, houses as large as these but sleekly contemporary with cathedral ceilings, country kitchens that were self-contained apartments, indoor swimming pools. Mr. Leigh had been wittily contemptuous of these—"McMansions" they were called. But then, Mr. Leigh's real-estate agency had not brokered the land for these showy properties.

There was Mark waiting on a side porch, smoking a cigarette. Not sitting on the comfortable rattan sofa-swing where in early evening their mother often sat in warm weather, listening, as Mrs. Leigh said, to the birds' vespers, but on his feet, with a look of barely concealed impatience.

"Is something wrong, Mark?"

Shannon stared at her brother's face. His expression was unreadable.

Mark led Shannon inside the house. Only the previous evening she'd been here, sorting things with Mark, labeling and ticketing things for Estates Managers, Inc. to haul away; she felt at once the familiar oppression like a dull ache behind the eyes; like a dream she'd imagined she had wakened from, but had not. The old brick colonial which had once belonged to Mr. Leigh's parents, dignified and stately from the street, was shabby close up, and would be marketed at a price that would have deeply insulted Mr. Leigh had he known. It smelled of dust and mice and that faint sour chemical odor Shannon didn't want to think was the odor of her father's dying body after months of his futile treatment. Most of the rooms were only partly furnished now yet seemed crowded, for there were cartons and movers' barrels amid the furniture, shadeless lamps, mirrors and wall hangings and stacks of leatherbound books unread for decades. Neither Mark nor Shannon had room for their parents' cherished belongings.

"We should each take something. As a memento at least," Shannon said. Mark had said, "Go ahead. Take whatever you want."

On the kitchen table was a chipped metal box, covered in dust and cobwebs, measuring about two feet by eighteen inches, and about twelve inches deep. Mark had found it in the cellar, he said, beneath their father's old workbench. Shannon approached the opened box dry-mouthed. She'd never seen it before, she was certain.

"What is it?"

"See for yourself." From boyhood Mark had tended to sobriety. Rarely did he joke, at least with Shannon; he wasn't one to exaggerate, or to dramatize. Shannon thought, Should I look? Should I peek? As a child she'd had a way of hiding her eyes with her hands but separating her fingers so she could peek through, giggling with shivery excitement. As an adult she had no choice but to look head-on.

Mark, smoking his cigarette, walked out onto the porch leaving Shannon to ponder the material inside their father's box by her-

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self. She noted that Mark had taken nothing out of the box but had left it as he'd presumably found it, in layers like rock strata.

On top were yellowed newspaper clippings. The entire front page of the *Strykersville Journal.* GIRL MISSING. 10-YEAR-OLD GIRL MISSING. NIAGARA COUNTY POLICE BAFFLED IN MISSING-CHILD CASE. NO RANSOM NOTE, PEERY FAMILY INSISTS. LISA PEERY, 10 YEARS OLD. MYRTLE PARK ABDUCTION SEARCH CONTINUES. The little girl had "vanished"—"disappeared" while playing in the park. She'd been with several other children including her twelve-year-old sister but she had apparently "wandered off." The ravine cut through the park dividing it into two general areas. The area beyond the ravine tended to be overgrown, littered. Still, there was a picnic grove there, a place romantically sheltered by tall evergreens, as Shannon recalled, and it was believed that Lisa Peery had been playing with a dog there, or had followed a dog; she hadn't been missed by the other children for perhaps half an hour. Then no one could find her.

Reports had been of a car with out-of-state license plates idling in the road beyond the picnic grove. Several individuals had insisted they'd seen a stranger in the park at about that time: a man. One witness believed he was "Negro." At any rate, "dark-skinned." He had a moustache, he wore dark glasses. He wore dark clothes. He was "tall"—he was "short and heavyset"—"somewhere in his late twenties"—"somewhere in his late thirties."

The abductor of Lisa Peery was never found. Her body had never been found. So far as anyone knew, no ransom note had been sent. There were days, in time there were weeks of search parties, local police, Boy Scouts, citizen volunteers from everywhere in the county. Panic in Strykersville, especially in the families of elementary school children. Everywhere on lampposts, walls, fences were posters of Lisa Peery's innocently smiling face. MISSING. CHILD MISSING. HAVE YOU SEEN ME?

Eventually Lisa Peery subsided into Strykersville legend. The nightmare belonged to a bygone season in Shannon's adolescent life which, from her adult perspective, had now a remote and bittersweet aura like the teen music, hair styles, clothes of that time. These were memories with the power to embarrass but not to illuminate.

The Leighs' two-acre property was adjacent to a densely wooded section of Myrtle Park. The land was hilly here, with bare outcroppings of rock and wild rose. In the weeks following the abduction, Mr. Leigh, at that time a vigorous, stocky man of fifty-two, had helped participate in one or two of the searches. He'd contributed to a fund for a $25,000 reward offered for information leading to Lisa Peery's safe return. Shannon recalled her father saying, in a quavering voice, "That cowardly bastard is one thousand miles away with that child by now. We can only pray he will let her live."

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Beneath the newspaper clippings were torn-out pages from what must have been pornographic magazines. Stark, up-close photos of very young, naked girls, some of them luridly made up with lipstick, rouge, eyeliner, and teased hair. The youngest were no older than four, the eldest about eleven. The girls' faces appeared stunned, or were contorted and weeping, or, worse, smiling slyly at the camera as they'd been taught.

"Oh, my God."

Shannon stepped back from the box, appalled.

Mark was watching her from the doorway. "Look at the bottom of the box. Don't touch the things, just look." Shannon did as Mark told, steeling herself for something very ugly. She saw a child's plastic barrette, a single badly soiled white anklet sock, a lock of curly pale blond hair.

Mark said, "And there's this key."

Key? To what? Through her eyes that were stinging with moisture Shannon now stared at the key in the palm of Mark's hand. It appeared to be an ordinary household key, slightly rusted.

"It was in the box," Mark said. "I've been checking, I think it must be to the fruit cellar. There's a padlock on the door."

The fruit cellar: Shannon had not thought of it in years.

Really it wasn't a cellar, just a closet in the old part of the cellar; that part that belonged to the original Leigh house, built in the late 1890s. Over the decades the house had been substantially remodeled, expanded, modernized; a new addition had been built that was as large as the original house; an attractive new basement had been added, with a concrete floor covered in linoleum. Only the earthen-floored fruit cellar remained, relic of an earlier, seemingly more innocent era before the 1960s when even well-to-do women like Shannon's grandmother had preserved and canned fruit in glass jars, an elaborate process requiring many hours' work; these jars had been stored in the fruit cellar, a cavelike space of the size of a good walk-in closet hollowed out of the earth and lined with stone and mortar. One spring day when Shannon was in seventh grade, Mrs. Leigh had asked her to help clean out the old fruit cellar, and so they'd emptied that dank, cobwebbed space of aged jars of fruit (pears, peaches, cherries) that no one had ever troubled to open, and eat; these must have been twenty years old, Mrs. Leigh said, and would be moldy by now, poison. There had been something fascinating—Shannon was remembering now, with a shudder—about holding in your hand a heavy jar of fruit that was very likely toxic, though possibly, in a dish, it would look like any other canned fruit. (Except: Probably it would smell. The fruit cellar stank.) Shannon and her mother hadn't been able to clean the fruit cellar of the accumulated dirt of decades but they'd emptied the shelves, Mrs. Leigh had aimed the

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vacuum cleaner nozzle into the corners, and shut the door again.

There had never been any padlock on the fruit cellar door, that Shannon could remember. To what purpose, a lock on that door?

"We wouldn't have to open it."

"We do, though."

They were in the basement, in the older area. Here, the ceiling was lower than in the newer area. There was a strong smell of damp. Mark was standing before the door to the fruit cellar, fumbling the key, trying to fit it into the rusted padlock. (Yes, there was a padlock on the door Shannon could swear had not existed until now.) In the thin light from overhead, that had the prismatic quaver of light reflected in water, the slot for the key looked fine as a hair. Shannon was swallowing compulsively, tasting something black and chill at the back of her mouth. She saw that her tall assured brother was perspiring, and that his hand trembled. With a stab of satisfaction she saw that his hair was thinning at the crown of his head. Mark was headmaster of a prestigious New England prep school, a man accustomed to giving orders and being obeyed, but now he stood stooped, uncertain, trying to force a key into a rusted padlock. Shannon said, her voice rising sharply, "We don't have to open it, Mark."

"Of course we do."

"God. I hate you."

Without knowing what she did Shannon snatched the key from her brother's fingers and threw it clumsily, blindly away. The key clattered against a wall and fell to the floor glinting, clearly visible. Before Mark could curse her, Shannon ran from the room, into the newer part of the basement. Here the ceiling was higher and the space less oppressive but still the overhead lights made her eyes ache. In a panic she was remembering how, when she'd been a little girl, she'd trailed her father around the house, for her father was so rarely in the house; sometimes she would discover him in the cellar at what he called his workbench; here, he had electrical tools, as well as hammers, pliers, screwdrivers. She remembered brightly calling, "Daddy?" Descending the stairs in the pretense that Daddy wanted her company, and there was Daddy with his back to her, at the workbench, quickly sliding something into a manila envelope, and the envelope into a drawer, and the drawer firmly shut, she'd had the impression it was a magazine but she knew better than to inquire for Daddy didn't like inquisitive little girls.

She was trying to remember her father's face. He'd been a young man then, or nearly. His smile, the glint of his eyeglasses. She tried but couldn't remember his eyes behind those chunky black-rimmed glasses but of course they'd been there, Daddy's eyes. And there was Daddy smiling at her, "Why, Shannon! What brings you down here?" ●

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Won't You Come Out Tonight?

by Josh Pachter

The envelope was precisely centered on her desk when she returned from lunch at the McDonald's across the street. No address, no return address, of course no stamp or cancellation. Just her first name, misspelled "Sherry," neatly printed in the exact center of the white oblong.

Sheri Lane set down her steaming foam cup, shrugged out of her parka, and sat. She pulled the lid off the cup, stirred two and a half packets of Equal into her coffee, took a cautious sip. Hot! She parked the coffee, picked up the envelope, and turned it over. The other side was blank, except for "SWAK" lettered in miniature on the flap. The acronym took her back twenty years, almost half her life, to junior high school romances she thought she'd long since forgotten. Sealed with a kiss.

She picked up the jeweled souvenir dagger she used as a letter opener, slit the envelope open carefully, and slid out a folded sheet of cream-colored notepaper. She unfolded it and read the two lines of printing just above and below the fold: "Sherry, baby: Won't you come out tonight?"

Although the office was at least forty degrees warmer than the bitter December day outside, she shivered.

"Well?"

She looked up from a sheaf of projections for next-quarter sales.

In 1969, after the publication of his first short story in *EQMM*, Josh Pachter became the youngest active member in the history of the MWA. Since then, more than fifty of his stories have appeared in the pages of *EQMM*, *AHMM*, and dozens of other magazines and anthologies published in the U.S. and around the world. Mr. Pachter is also an award-winning translator who recently provided a story from the Dutch for our Passport to Crime series. †

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The man standing at the side of her desk, half a step too close for comfort, was vaguely familiar. He was new, she thought. She had the impression she'd noticed him in the elevator once or twice, but she wasn't sure. He was thin, not quite gawky but not far from it, in a suit that had been in style not long ago and would undoubtedly someday be back in style again. A sprinkling of acne scars marred an otherwise not unpleasant face. His intense brown eyes were his best feature, but they were almost hidden behind thick lenses in an old-fashioned John Lennon wire frame.

"Well?" she echoed, pushing her chair back a foot to reestablish proper social distance between them.

"My note," he said, smiling, sitting himself easily on the edge of her desk. " 'Won't you come out tonight?' "

Her face cleared. "That was you," she said. "How did you know?"

Now it was his turn to look confused. "Know?"

"The song. It was number one the week I was born, and my mother had a crush on Frankie Valli, so she named me after the song. My father made her change the spelling, though. One *r* and an *i*."

"Oh, God, I had no idea. I pointed you out to John Testa in Marketing yesterday, and he told me your name, and I just thought of the song and left the note."

"And the SWAK?"

He grimaced. "Just being goofy. I hope you don't mind."

She turned away from him, put out a hand to her McDonald's cup. The cup was empty, but she knew that. She picked it up and drank a fake swallow, buying time.

"It doesn't really matter," she said at last, dismissing not only the high-school kiss but the note itself, and him.

Then, realizing she'd been ruder than the situation called for, she tacked on a questioning, "And you are—?"

He washed a hand across his chin. "Darrin," he said. "Darrin Stephens."

She blinked.

"No, really," he said.

"You mean—?" She twitched her nose.

He nodded. "Same spelling, too. Nothing to do with *Bewitched,* though. My parents never even heard of the show."

"Poor you. You must have taken a lot of kidding, growing up."

He was still nodding. "Yup. So, what do you say?"

"Say?"

"About my note? Won't you come out tonight? For dinner, maybe?"

"Oh." She shook her head. "Appreciate your asking. I've got plans, though. Sorry."

He hitched himself an inch closer. "Tomorrow, then? We could

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have lunch, maybe, or just a drink after work, if you'd prefer?"

She took a deep breath, sighed it out. "Thanks, Darrin, but no, I don't think so."

His broad smile finally began to fade. "Boyfriend?" he asked.

She refused to be drawn into revelations about her personal life. "I don't date men from the office, Darrin. I just don't. But thanks for asking."

He looked at her closely for a long moment, then lifted his hands in an "Oh, well" gesture and stood up. "I guess I'll be seeing you around," he said, and walked off before she could say goodbye.

Lynn Kasza squeezed into the chair across the white linoleum table from her, unwrapped her Filet-O-Fish, ripped open a packet of ketchup and smothered her fries, stripped the paper from a straw and squeaked it through the plastic lid atop her cup. "So?" she demanded. "Is he as geeky as he looks, or what?"

Sheri looked up from her salad. "I beg your pardon?"

"Don't be coy, girlfriend—inquiring minds want to know." She took a huge bite of her sandwich, chewed and swallowed, and washed the fish down with chocolate milkshake.

Sheri just looked at her blankly.

"Mrs. Stephens's little boy," Lynn prodded. "What's he *really* like?"

"What are you *talking* about?"

"Duh?" Lynn wagged an admonishing French fry. "Your *date?* With Darrin *Stephens?* How'd it *go?"*

"I didn't go out with Darrin Stephens." She frowned. "You know I don't date guys from work."

"Well, that's what I *thought,"* Lynn said. "But Carrie said Lisa said he said you went out."

"Carrie said—? He said we went out? Where? When?"

"To dinner at Angelo's. *Très chic, non?* And then you went up to his place and—" She made quotation marks on either side of her face with her fingers—"hung out for a couple of hours."

Sheri tossed down her plastic fork. "That *bastard!* I did *not* go out with him, Lynn, and I—"

"—wouldn't go out with you even if *liked* you, which, believe me, I most certainly do *not!"*

She stormed out of his cubicle and slammed the door behind her, then turned around and went back inside, leaving the door open. She leaned over his desk, her weight resting on clenched fists. "I'm going to pretend this didn't happen, Darrin, but I swear to God, if you so much as mention my *name* to anybody here again, I am going *straight* to Mr. Brownlee and you will be out on the street so fast your head won't stop spinning for a week."

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Darrin smiled, a crooked smile that made him almost attractive. "I don't think so," he said.

Sheri stared at him. "You don't think I'll go to Mr. Brownlee? You just try me, buster, and—"

"I don't think he'll can me." He was wearing the same suit he'd had on the other day, this time with a flamboyant Jerry Garcia tie. The jacket was buttoned, but beneath it Sheri swore there was a plastic holder full of pens in his shirt pocket. "He's my uncle, Sheri. Uncle Bobby, my mother's baby brother. He got me this job in the first place. So who do you think he'll believe, you or me?"

He looked so smug, Sheri wanted to punch him right in the nose. "You son of a *bitch,"* she said instead, and went away from there.

The phone was ringing when she got home that evening. There was no one she much felt like talking to, so she let the machine pick it up. "I'm sorry," her voice said, "but I can't come to the phone right now. Please leave a message when you hear the tone, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

There was a long beep, and then she heard him singing: "Sheh-heh-*heh*-eh-eh-eh-ree-ee, bay-ay-bee, Sheri, baby, Sheh-*heh*-ree, won't you come out tonight?"

She snatched up the receiver. "I don't care if he *is* your uncle," she said tightly. "I don't want you calling me, I don't want you talking to my friends, I don't want you following me around. I told you, I don't date where I work, and I *damn* well don't date creeps like you. So just leave me *alone,* okay? Just leave—me—*alone!"*

She paused, breathing deeply, enraged. At the other end of the line, she heard a faint click, and then a dial tone.

"How about that booth over there by the window?" He touched her elbow and tried to turn her, but she jerked her arm free and walked ahead of him to the bar. There were four vacant stools in a row at the far end, but she chose a single between a truck driver drinking Bud from a longneck and two secretaries gossiping over strawberry daquiris.

Darrin stood too close behind her, unbuttoning his London Fog and loosening his tie. When the bartender came over, he ordered a Manhattan. She had never heard anyone order a Manhattan before. She wasn't sure she knew what it was. "Scotch," she said. "Single malt. In a glass."

The barman raised an eyebrow. "That was good." He nodded. "Can you do the thing with your upper lip?"

The truck driver set down his empty bottle, stifled a belch, and went away, and Darrin settled onto his stool. "What thing is that?" he asked.

She exchanged glances with the bartender. "Nobody watches the

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black-and-white ones anymore," he mourned, and set glasses in front of them.

"Black-and-white?" Darrin said. "What's *that* all—?"

"Never mind. Just drink your drink." She looked at her watch impatiently. She had to be crazy, coming out with him like this. "One drink, right? And then you'll leave me alone?"

His chocolate-brown eyes glittered. "Promise," he said, his hand on his heart. "I mean, if you have a good time, if you decide you *want* to go out with me again, well, great—but all I wanted from the beginning was one shot."

"One shot," she said, raising her glass and draining it. The smooth burn almost melted the knot in her stomach. Not quite, though.

"Thank you for the drink, Darrin," she said. "It's been real. Good night."

There were roses in a cut-glass vase on her desk when she got to work in the morning, ten of them, nicely arranged with ferns and a spray of baby's breath. Her name was spelled correctly on the small envelope tucked in among the flowers.

They don't have to be from him, she told herself. But when she saw the SWAK on the back of the envelope, she pitched the whole shebang in the trash—roses, vase, unopened envelope and all. She knew what it would say on the card.

At lunch on Tuesday, Lynn told her it was all over the building she'd slept with him. She debated confronting him again, but what was the use? The man was out of his *mind.* Not only couldn't he take a hint, he couldn't read a *billboard.* Lynn suggested the police, but Sheri'd read that the state's new stalker law was a joke.

When she got home that evening, there were ten white envelopes taped to her front door, all of them sealed with kisses. She was so outraged that she opened them. Every single one of them held a cream notecard, and each notecard said, "Won't you come out tonight?" in a different color ink.

Something awoke her after midnight. She sat up in bed, her head throbbing. She'd finished off almost half a bottle of vodka that evening, watching Darrin's notecards burn in her fireplace.

There it was again. There was someone at her door.

She grabbed a thick terrycloth robe and shrugged it on, stole down the hall to the foyer, put an eye to the peephole.

Nothing.

She left the chain in place and opened the door a crack. On the porch was a cut-glass vase holding ten red roses. She couldn't see a card. She released the chain and swung the door wide.

There were ten white envelopes taped to the door.

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She bought the pistol the next day at lunch.

There was nothing in the Yellow Pages under "Firearms," but under "Guns & Gunsmiths" she found four columns of listings and a half-dozen display ads. Metropolitan Arms and Armor was only four blocks from the office. She left her car in the lot and walked. The salesman, a squat homunculus with a salt-and-pepper spade beard and the unidentifiable edge of an old tattoo peeking out from beneath the rolled-up sleeve of his red flannel shirt, recommended the Beretta .380 ACP, a 9mm. short with a magazine holding 13 cartridges, and offered to throw in a box of 20 Federal Hydra-Shoc hollow points to sweeten the deal, but $350 was much more than she wanted to spend, so she settled on a Taurus Model 65 six-shot revolver, a .38 Special. All the caliber numbers and model numbers and firepower statistics were meaningless to her—the salesman assured her the Taurus was easy to use and well suited for self-defense, the price was only $180, and her birthday was at the end of April, so Taurus was her sign.

"Can I—I don't know how to say it—try it out, first?" she asked.

He looked at her as if she'd lost her mind. "Lady, I don't have a range in here," he explained, excessively patient, "and even if I did, I let you fire it and you decide not to buy it, it's all of a sudden a used gun and I have to knock fifty bucks off the price."

She nodded, understanding, and he showed her at least how to load it and fire it. When she asked him where the safety was, he sighed and explained that a revolver has no safety, but would, in fact, be safer for her to carry and use than the Beretta, as long as she made sure to leave it uncocked.

The five-day waiting period wasn't due to take effect for another four months, so all she had to do was show her driver's license and fill out Federal Firearms Transaction Form 4473. No, she was not a convicted felon, she was not currently under indictment, she was not addicted to drugs or alcohol, she had not been judged mentally incompetent, she was not an alien residing illegally in the United States.

She marveled at the inanity of the form, wondering if even those who *had* been judged mentally incompetent would be foolish enough to check "yes" in response to any of these questions.

Including $12.95 for a box of Winchester Silvertips, their aluminum-jacketed soft-lead bodies unexpectedly heavy yet comforting in her palm, and state sales tax, the total came to a little over $200. She didn't have that much cash on her, so she put the purchase on her VISA.

She named the gun Bull, after Taurus, and then thought of the tall bald bailiff on *Night Court* and smiled.

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She decided not to carry Bull around with her: At the office, in town, she felt perfectly safe. It was only at home that she felt vulnerable, so she kept Bull on an end table beside the sofa during the evening, as she watched television or read, and moved him to the nightstand beside her bed when she went to sleep. From time to time, she reached out a hand and touched him, and the cool solidity of him reassured her.

For the next two days, Darrin left her alone, almost as if he knew she had brought Bull into her home.

Did he know? Could he have followed her to the gun shop and seen her make the purchase? It was just as well if he had, if that's what was keeping him away from her.

Then, Friday at lunch, Lynn said, "Your boyfriend'll be back in town tonight. I bet you're thrilled and delighted."

Sheri stared at her.

"Darrin," Lynn explained. "They sent him to Chicago for the RFC, didn't you know? And I was *kidding* about the 'boyfriend,' girlfriend. Don't look so stricken."

"When—" Her throat was constricted, and she started again—"When did he leave?"

Lynn dipped a McNugget thoughtfully in sweet-and-sour sauce. "Day before yesterday, I think. Why?"

Sheri stood up and put on her parka and scarf and gloves and went away, her food scarely touched.

He called her four times that evening, and there were more roses on the porch when she went out to get the paper Saturday morning. She called the operator and asked about getting her phone number changed and unlisted, but there was nothing anyone could do about it until Monday morning. She switched off the ringer and turned the speaker volume down to zero. By 11 P.M., eight messages had accumulated; one was a hangup, and the other seven were all him, all singing that damn song.

She turned the machine off altogether when she went to bed, and kept Bull beneath her pillow, and still slept badly. When she *did* sleep, she dreamed of a beautiful witch with a twitching nose, imprisoned in a dark dungeon.

Well, *duh,* she thought when she awoke, sweating, her blankets hopelessly twisted.

He was listed in the book. She waited until eight Sunday morning, and then she called him.

"Sheri?" he said blearily.

"No," she spat, "it's Laura Bush. Now, you listen to me, you bastard. I don't want you calling me, I don't want your stupid flowers, I don't want your notes."

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"Why don't you just go out with me?" he said, awake now. "If you got to know me, you'd really like me."

"I *went* out with you, Darrin. I *got* to know you. I really *don't* like you."

"But I—"

"Shut up!" Her voice was tighter than she could ever remember it. "I don't know what your problem is, Darrin, and I don't care. But it's *your* problem, not mine. I'll tell you what: I've been *very* patient with you, but my patience is *gone*. It's time for you to leave me alone."

She slammed down the phone.

Ten seconds later, it rang. She gripped the receiver, but stopped herself from lifting it. Instead, she pushed the button to reactivate the machine. It picked up on the third ring.

"Sheri?" Darrin said after the beep. "I know you're there, Sheri."

There was a pause, and then he began to sing.

"Has the caller made physical threats against your person, ma'am?"

"No, he—"

"Has the caller used obscene or abusive language?"

"No, Sergeant, he just keeps asking me *out.*"

"Well, I'm afraid there's nothing we can do, unless he's threatened you or been obscene or abusive, ma'am. Your best bet is to call the telephone company's business office and report the—"

"There's nobody there until tomorrow morning, Sergeant, that's why I'm—"

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I'm afraid there's nothing we can—"

"—do," she said. "Can you believe it? This little cretin can do whatever he wants, and the *police* can't do a thing to stop him?"

"Did you try talking to Uncle Bob?" Lynn said. "Maybe he—"

"Uncle Bobby," Sheri corrected. "Can you just *see* the Honorable Robert Brownlee, Esquire, answering to 'Uncle Bobby'? I tried to get in to see him the other day, but Doris just gave me that I-pity-you look of hers and wouldn't even let me make an appointment."

"What about writing him an e-mail?"

"And say *what?* 'I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Brownlee, but your sister's little Darrin has been sending me flowers and I want you to make him stop'?"

"Well, you have to—oh gosh, Sheri, there's Donald, I gotta go. You hang in there, girlfriend. See you tomorrow morning."

Sheri set down the receiver, and the phone rang immediately, burning her fingers.

Finally, a few minutes before midnight, she unplugged it and crawled into bed, pulled the covers over her head, and tried to sleep.

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The doorbell rang at 1:22 A.M., and she plugged in the phone and called the police and reported a prowler. By the time the black-and-white pulled up before her bungalow, though, Darrin was long gone. The officers looked suspiciously at her wild hair and red eyes, made only the sketchiest of notes, and drove off with vague promises.

At 3:41, the doorbell rang again. This time, it took forty-five minutes for the patrol car to arrive, and the same two bored officers stayed less than a quarter of an hour and didn't even bother to take out their notebooks.

At 4:45, only moments after the police had gone and Sheri had returned to her bedroom, the doorbell rang again. She didn't bother to dial 911, just crushed her pillow tightly against her ears and hummed into her percale top sheet in a hollow attempt to drown out the chime.

When she noticed what song she was humming, she bit her lower lip hard enough to draw blood.

At 7:00, she was sitting on the edge of the couch, waiting for him. When the doorbell rang at 7:16, she jumped up, grabbed Bull from the end table, and strode to the front door. "Leave me the hell *alone!*" she screamed.

The recoil when she pulled the trigger was enormous, vastly more powerful than she would have believed possible. The revolver bucked in her hand as she fired again and again and again through the panels of the closed door.

At last the six chambers were empty. She stood there in the foyer, shaking with rage, with hatred, with fear.

The telephone rang.

She turned to stare across the room at it, then swiveled slowly back to the door, released the chain, touched the cool brass knob, swung the door wide.

Crumpled on her porch was the body of a man.

Behind her, her own voice said, "I'm sorry, but I can't come to the phone right now. Please leave a message when you hear the tone, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

The man held a plain white envelope in his hand. The letters S-W-A were visible between his splayed fingers. His overcoat was tattered and patched and covered with blood. He had wild gray hair and a rough beard.

She had no idea who he was.

"Sheh-heh-*heh*-eh-eh-eh-ree-ee, bay-ay-bee," Darrin Stephens sang from her answering machine's speaker. "Sheh-*heh*-ree, won't you come out tonight?" ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

ROAD BOMB

by James H. Cobb

We buried Joe Summervale on a warm fall day in 1957, and man, it was something to see.

Joe was a hot rodder and a damn nice guy and the brotherhood gathered to wish him farewell. Three blocks' worth of rods and street customs followed the hearse and the family limousines down Pasadena's Colorado Boulevard. Black streamers trailed from radio antennas and spotlight brackets, contrasting with painted flames and glittering chrome, and fifty souped-up V-8's sounded a rumbling dirge through gutted mufflers.

I drive a Q-ship, myself. Unless you know exactly what to look and listen for, Car seems to be a buttstock 1957 Chevy, a stark black-and-white two-door sedan without even a set of fancy wheel covers to jazz her up. Yet they put us right up front, behind the limos. Joe's family insisted. I guess it was because I'd been there through those wild first hours after Joe and his fiancée, Linda Bell, had been killed, and that I'd been the cop who'd finally sorted it all out.

There were other reasons, too, I guess.

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It started the same way it ended, with a line of sharp street iron rolling beneath a bright California sun. The reason had been far different, though, an open Rod Run organized by Joe's car club, the Pasadena Royals, a Saturday opportunity for a bunch of L.A. basin rodneys to gather, socialize, and show off their wheels.

We'd rallied at Larry's Drive-in on Foothills Boulevard and had moved out before noon, rolling east in a pipe-rapping convoy for El Cajon Pass. A cold drink and a cool-off stop had followed at the Summit Inn up on Route 66, and then we started the long climb up the rear slope of the San Gabriel range, following the winding concrete thread of the Angeles Crest Highway. With the passage of summer, the mountains were greening up once more, and the air had a touch of autumn's bite to it. It was a good day for enjoying the road.

James H. Cobb is the author of the Amanda Garrett techno-thriller series published by G.P. Putnam, which includes the novels *Choosers of the Slain, Sea Strike, Sea Fighter,* and *Target Lock.* The series to which this story belongs stars Kevin Pulaski, anything but a classic noir detective. "Instead," his creator explains, "he's a member of the 1950s California car culture whose day job happens to be with the L.A. sheriff's department." ✝

Our eventual target was a Forest Service picnic ground below Josephine Peak. A spot that provided both a good place for an open-air supper and an overview of the distant city and sunset. Parking spaces were found, blankets were spread under the pine trees, and wives and girlfriends unloaded baskets and coolers. Church keys popped, car radios dialed in to rock-'n'-roll, and the bench-racing began.

There was talk about new speed techniques and old races. Times from the last El Mirage speed meet were compared, and threats issued as to what records were going to fall on the next go-round. The National Hot Rod Association's ban on nitromethane fuels for the 1957-58 drag season was hashed over . . . again. (The ice-cream rodders protested that Wally Parks really hadn't sold his soul to the devil and the insurance companies while we greasy ol' outlaws bitched that if you don't intend to go as fast as you can, why the hell bother to race in the first place?) As usual, no agreement was reached.

I was running stag that day, so I marauded, making the rounds, shooting the breeze, and treating the various picnic spreads like a smorgasbord. On towards dessert time, I found myself thinking about Linda Bell's vanilla fudge brownies.

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Joe and Linda had picked a shady spot well back from the parking area and most of the crowd. Probably it wasn't the quintessence of couth to go crashing the engaged couple's private party, but the lure of those brownies was strong.

I didn't have to worry. Joe and Linda were the sociable type and I readily received an invite to both a corner of their blanket and their brownie plate.

"So, when do we get to meet this new mystery girl of yours, Kevin?" Linda asked as I enjoyed the bounty.

"Lisette? Oh, pretty quick, I guess," I replied. "She's found an art school she likes and we've got her an apartment lined up. She'd be here now except for some legal business she had to wrap up back in Gary."

"What's this living doll of yours like, Kev?" Joe asked, propping himself up on one elbow.

I didn't mind him asking. I like talking about Lisette. Since we've connected, she's become a favorite topic of mine. "Well, let me put it this way, man. Once the princess is out here to stay, you're going to be marrying the second prettiest girl in Los Angeles. No offense, Linda."

"None taken." Linda chuckled. Linda was one of those fiery red-gold redheads, her big blue eyes backed up by a scattering of freckles over her snub Irish nose.

Joe laughed, resting a hand on Linda's knee. "That I gotta see to believe." Blunt-featured, solid, and stocky, Joe always seemed a little amazed that a totally gone dish like Linda had fallen for him. The truth was, Joe was a pretty worthwhile character. Hard-working, good-natured, and as dependable as a Stovebolt 6, he was the kind of guy the smart ladies go for in the long run. And Linda was a very smart lady.

Joe was also a boss car man. A mainstay of the Royals, he'd built himself one perilously mean '55 Corvette roadster. In drag racing he didn't quite have the reflexes to be a real killer coming off the line, but get up there in the high end and brother, you had to beat him off with a club.

"I don't know, Joe." Linda giggled. "Kev sounds like he might be developing a pretty bad case over his princess. Maybe we should start planning a double wedding?"

I just grinned and shrugged. There are still a whole lot of "we'll see's" tied up with the lady Lisette. She's a different breed of kitten. But one of these days we'll see.

Just then, a pretty credible panther scream sounded behind us and a wiry figure hurtled out of the underbrush. Crashing down at the edge of the blanket, he deftly scored the last brownie right out from under my fingers.

If you hung around with Joe enough you got used to this kind of

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thing. "Hiya, runt," I grunted. "Where were they carrying you? In the trunk?"

Joe's sixteen-year-old younger brother, Danny, rolled onto his back and grinned at my hassling. Tow-headed and as skinny as his bro was stocky, he was clad in the classic uniform of the California hot rodder: jeans, engineer's boots, and a T-shirt. "No way, man. I got my own wheels now."

I quaked in horror. "Godfry Daniels! Tell me it isn't true!"

"It is." Joe nodded proudly. "As of the last meeting, Dan-O here is the newest official member of the Royals."

"Jeez! You guys are letting anybody in these days! Whatcha runnin', kid?"

"A 'thirty-seven Ford coupe." Danny let the year and make roll off his tongue with as much pride as if he'd been saying "Bentley Continental" or "Mercedes 300." "She's still got the original flathead but she's been lowered and I've got dual pipes and Smitties on her. Oh, and hey, Joe, I was over talking to Lenny Smith and he'll make me a real deal on a dual Almquist manifold and a set of Strombergs. . . ."

The smile on the kid's face could have lit up half of the L.A. basin. At long damn last he was one of the big guys, an equal.

For just about forever, Danny had been Joe's shadow at the dry lakes and the drag strips, a skinny, pain-in-the-butt kid, prone to playing pranks and hunting for attention. We'd all put up with him, though. I guess because we could read the wheels hunger in his eyes. That dream of the day when he'd have a hot car of his own. Hell, we'd all been there once.

"Listen, Danny," Joe said firmly, "I already told you that the next 'real deal' you're going to make is for a set of hydraulic brakes. I've done everything I can with those damn cablematics on your Ford and it's not near enough. Once we get some decent binders bolted onto your heap, then we can start talking about speed parts."

"Oh, jeez, Joe! Come on . . ."

I swapped headshakes with Linda as the fraternal wrangling raged. These were good people, real good people. When you make your living in law enforcement like I do, it's important to hang around with folks like this. They remind you that there's more to the world than the dark and dirty side of things. They also remind you about why you became a cop in the first place.

Evening drifted on, the last coke bottles and beer cans were emptied, and the sun settled into the distant Pacific with a contented sigh. A cool breeze rippled down from the crests of the San Gabes and people started packing their picnic stuff away. Engines started to kick over.

Joe stood and stretched. "Let's get goin'."

Danny looked up at his brother and frowned. "Ah, come on, Joe.

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It's early still. Let's hang around awhile longer. It's just getting nice up here."

"No chance, runt. Get it in gear." Joe gave his lady a meaningful glance. "Linda and I have plans for this evening. We'll see you around, Kevin."

"Later, man," I replied, getting to my feet and brushing off my Levis. "You too, pretty girl. And, Danny, when you're ready to start talking serious gow for that beast of yours, you come and see me. Forget that Almquist manifold. What you want is an Edelbrock and I know where we can go handshaking for one."

The column of hot rods swung onto the highway for the final 4000-foot dive to the city and the end of the run. Dusk was settling fast as we slalomed down Angeles Canyon, the two-lane stretching out evening-empty. The line of cars began to string out as guys tacked on speed. Nobody was racing, or even exceeded the speed limit worth mentioning, but we savored this last chance to dance with the road. The growing chill of the slipstream felt good as it roared in through the windows and rubber chirped softly as we hung deep into the curves.

As fate decreed, Car and I had pulled out directly behind Joe's sapphire-blue Corvette. I was tempted to push him a little (he'd referred to my '57 as "that battleship" on more than one occasion), but I was feeling too mellow that night. Instead, I hung back, content to watch the low-slung car snake down the mountain ahead of me. I couldn't help but note Linda's red head resting on Joe's shoulder and I found myself wishing for the warm presence of a certain little Siamese-eyed brunette of my acquaintance.

The shadows were filling the canyon and I reached down to flick on the '57's headlights. I looked up just in time to see Joe's Corvette explode.

There was a burst of blue-orange flame and the roadster's front fenders disintegrated in a spray of shattered Fiberglas, the hood peeling back to smash into the windshield. Trailing smoke, the 'vette veered wildly, angling toward the outside edge of the road. Maybe the blast had trashed the steering or maybe Joe and Linda had already been knocked unconscious. I hope so, anyway.

We'd been coming into another curve, but the guardrail was just ten feet too far away to save them. Instead, the Corvette plowed headlong into the first mounting post. Whipping sideways in a flat spin, it went off the highway and into the canyon. I caught the green flash of Linda's skirt as she was thrown out of the car by the lateral G load and then they were gone.

I stood on the binders and Car shuddered to a halt in a cloud of brake lining and burning rubber. The rods behind me pulled over as well and we were all bailing out and running for the crash site.

The shattered Corvette lay on its back on the bottom of the

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gorge about a hundred feet below the highway, a wadded-up lump of color off to one side possibly being Linda's body. There was no sign of Joe at all.

"Joe!" It was a bawling scream of raw anguish. Danny Summervale ran down the shoulder of the roadway, shoving the other stunned onlookers out of his way. I grabbed him a split second before he could dive over the edge.

"Danny! Hold it! It's no good!"

The kid wasn't listening. He wasn't all the way sane just then. He fought me wildly, all the time screaming that one name. "Joe!"

I shoved him back into the arms of a couple of the Royals. It was time to start being a cop. "Hold him, dammit! Everyone, stay up here on the road!"

A couple of guys in a scarlet A-V8 roadster pulled up beside us to gawk. I took two fast strides to the side of their car. "Listen! You guys haul down to the nearest phone. Call the sheriff's department and tell them you're calling for Deputy Kevin Pulaski, Metro Division, badge number seven forty-eight. Pulaski . . . Metro Division . . . seven . . . four . . . eight! Tell them we need the fire department and an ambulance! And tell them to roll the bomb squad and the homicide detail!"

"Homicide?" one of the guys gulped. "Like in murder?"

"Like in don't ask questions, man! Just do it! Go!"

The A-V8 peeled out, heading down canyon. I did the same, sliding down to the wreck from the road edge, my old jump boots digging into the parched and crumbly soil of the slope.

The wreck hadn't torched, thank God. The canyon floor was half filled with a tangle of chaparral and California holly and the demolished roadster lay on a bed of crushed underbrush. The only sounds were the creak and click of cooling metal and the distant sobbing of Danny Summervale up on the pavement.

I reached Linda first. She wasn't a pretty girl anymore, just a torn and broken bit of debris in the dry streambed. Yet she wasn't all the way gone. Not yet. A flutter of a heartbeat remained and a faint, rasping wheeze of lung action. She must have been busted all to hell and gone inside, but there was no major external bleeding and I didn't dare move her for fear of snapping that last tenuous thread that linked her to life. We could only wait for the medicos. More as a gesture than anything else I peeled off my windcheater and covered her.

"She's alive," I yelled up to the road. Then I turned to the 'vette. As I worked my way slowly around the wreck, I found Joe. Or rather, I found an arm and a clutching hand extending out from under the shattered hulk of the car. When I felt for a pulse, there was only a stillness. This time, I could only look up at the row of faces staring at me from along the road edge and shake my head.

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The L.A. County sheriff's department got it in gear in a hurry. It only seemed to take forever. Patrol cruisers arrived and secured the area, taking names and statements. Search and Rescue tenderly eased Linda up the hillside to a waiting ambulance. The traffic detail showed up, both enforcement and investigation, reopening the highway and starting their assessment of the wreck. As did Homicide, the bomb squad, and the lab crew from forensics.

As the only lawman witness, I repeated the story a dozen times over to a dozen different bosses, what there was of it and for what good it did. And I repeated a lot more than a dozen times over that, no, it wasn't just a wreck and, yeah, the damn car blew up, and, yeah again, it was a bomb!

I'd developed a very intimate acquaintance with high explosives during my year on the line in Korea. Likewise in all of my racing on circle tracks, drag strips, and dry lakes; I've seen just about every kind of fuel fire, crackup, and catastrophic engine failure you can imagine. This just didn't match. There'd been a bomb in Joe's car. But as for who could have put it there, or why, man, I didn't have a clue.

I was going to find out, though. You could abso-goddamn-lutely count on that.

I arranged for a friend to drive Danny's car to his folks' place, while I took the kid down with me. That meant I also got to break the news to Joe's parents, a job I was not particularly looking forward to.

Joe had still been living at home, saving on rent money for a down payment on a place for himself and Linda. His parents lived in a pre-War tract development on the north side of Pasadena, a house-shaped house on a street-shaped street. Joe's dad, a stocky, stooping man with a welder's squint, worked on the assembly line at Douglas Aviation. His mom was a gray-haired housewife running thirty pounds overweight. Nothing special, nothing special at all. Just a couple of good people who had raised a couple of good sons, one of whom had just died senselessly.

There was no screaming, no hysterics, at least not at first. Just that blank, shattered stare. Danny was still crying a little and his dad sat beside him on the couch, patting the boy on the back with clumsy gentleness.

I hated doing it, but I socked the spurs to myself and got to work. "Mr. Summervale, I know it's tough just now, but I have to ask you some questions. Did Joe mention any kind of problems he might have been having lately? Any kind of trouble that he might have been in?"

"Trouble?" Mr. Summervale replied hazily. "No, nothing. Joe

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never went looking for trouble."

"How about fights? Arguments? Was he having a beef with anyone at work or in the car club?"

Again the protesting shake of the head. "No! You know Joe. He worked things out or laughed them off. Ever since he was a little boy . . . never any trouble."

"How about with Linda? Were there any problems there?" I insisted. "Any fights? Any indication that Joe was jealous or angry about anything with her? Any mention of another guy she might have been seeing?"

"No. They were starting to plan the wedding. Joe said he needed just a little more in the bank. They were in love. . . ."

"Had Joe mentioned any new friends or acquaintances lately? Anyone new he'd been hanging around with?"

"No. Nobody. Nobody. . . ."

Joe's mom was crying now, too, deep, shuddering sobs, and tears began to glint in Mr. Summervale's eyes. The merciful anesthesia of shock was starting to fade. God, I wanted to back off so bad. Every instinct was to let these wounded people have their chance to grieve. But I couldn't. I had to keep pushing. A man had been killed and a girl was dying and somebody, somewhere, was responsible. The more time the perp had to run, the harder it would be to nail him.

To quote my partner and mentor, street cop par excellence Jack Le Baer, "Carrying a badge means that some days you just gotta plan on being a son of a bitch."

I suppressed the churning nausea in my gut. "Okay, did Joe mention any money problems that might be cropping up? Has he done any gambling lately . . . ?"

After I left the Summervale place, I headed downtown to the L.A. County Hall of Justice to file my report and to swap notes with the homicide and traffic division investigators assigned to the case.

So far, what we had didn't amount to much. Traffic agreed that this had not been any kind of conventional wreck.

"The breakup of the automobile started well before its impact against the guardrail post. There was no other vehicle or foreign-object involvement that could be recognized and the instigating event has yet to be identified."

Unquote.

The wreck was being brought in from the crash site. The lab crew would be working on it all night. Maybe they could give us something.

Homicide had also completed the initial questioning of the other witnesses and of Linda Bell's parents. They'd uncovered essentially the same story I'd heard at Joe's place.

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Joe Summervale and Linda Bell literally didn't have an enemy in the world. Or at least any known enemy who had an adequate motive for murder. Also no one had been seen messing around with Joe's car up at the park and no one recalled any suspicious characters hanging around the picnic grounds.

What with one thing or another, it was near midnight by the time I got back to Santa Monica. Turning off Euclid Street and into my alley, I parked the '57 under the pepper tree that grew beside the weird little former two-car garage/now backyard apartment I call home. A middle-of-the-night silence had settled over the neighborhood and there was a deadness inside my pad that I didn't have the energy to overcome. I didn't even bother with turning on the lights.

My stomach was empty, but the thought of my last meal and who I'd shared it with killed any thought of food. I dealt with the problem with a long pull from the milk bottle in the refrigerator. Going on into the minute living room, I dumped myself into the beat-up easy chair I use for television watching. My genuine made-in-Hawaii Polynesian Tiki god stood at my left elbow, half a pack of Luckys and a book of matches sitting in the abalone-shell ashtray built into his head. I lit up and stared at the unlit screen of my 12-inch Zenith.

It didn't add up. Bombs aren't a common murder weapon. There's a cold-blooded ruthlessness and deliberation to them that runs counter to the passion and anger that fuels most killings. You'll see them used by the mob sometimes, but usually they're assembled and planted by a highly paid specialist brought in to make a specific hit.

There was nothing about Joe or Linda that would make them a bombing target. He worked in the shop of a Goodyear tire dealership. She was a receptionist in an optometrist's office. Neither of them had any known criminal ties. Neither ran with a wild or dangerous crowd. Neither had more than middle-class money.

The only two possibilities that made any sense at all were that, A: the hit stemmed from a case of mistaken identity, i.e. the package that nailed Joe and Linda was actually addressed to somebody else. Or, B: some psycho with a sackful of high explosives had suddenly been stricken with an overwhelming urge to blow up a Corvette.

Neither concept was satisfying. Neither was the smoke I puffed down to ashes and a short butt. That didn't stop me from lighting up a second one, though, or a third. After a while I must have dozed off.

When I woke up, the steely light of dawn was leaking through the blinds. I grabbed a fast shower, a shave, and a clean T-shirt. After slugging down a cold bottle of RC Cola to wash the stale

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nicotine taste out of my mouth, I headed back downtown. Specifically, to the old Central Jail building that now housed the police crime labs.

Joe's demolished Corvette lay in the center of the dank jail garage. Around the main hulk, spaced out on tarpaulins spread on the concrete, were all of the other little bits and pieces of shattered car. Field teams, working by flashlight, had painstakingly collected them from the roadway and the canyon floor.

It made for one crazy jigsaw puzzle, but then, that's the deal with forensics. Any one of these fragments might be the key element in breaking this thing. Question was, which one?

Lieutenant Lee Jones was there, looking about as red-eyed and half-shot as me. Jones is one of the miracle workers of the LAPD Scientific Investigation Division. He literally helped write the book that everybody else uses. It's a sad surprise when the lieutenant and his lab guys can't pull a rabbit out of the hat for a stumped investigator.

I got to be sadly surprised.

"I'm sorry, Deputy, but we can't find any trace of an explosive device."

It was my turn to explode. "Jesus, Lieutenant! This car was less than fifty yards in front of me! I saw the damn thing blow!"

"I didn't say that you didn't," the lab man replied patiently. "Nor did I say that there wasn't a bomb. On the contrary, there is clear evidence of an explosive force released within the frontal structure of this automobile. Our problem is that we can't figure out what caused it. We haven't located any components from a timer or detonator. We can't identify any residual traces of an explosive agent, and the crash damage to the car is so extensive we're having a hard time placing a point of origin for the blast."

"No explosives trace at all?"

He shook his head. "We've run for all of the standards. Dynamite, gelignite, TNT, black and smokeless powder, even military plastique and straight nitro. No reaction. If this was a bomb, it must have been an exotic. If that's the case, we could be testing for days before we can isolate the compound used."

I looked around the display of trashed car, my sense of helplessness growing. "You said *if* this was a bomb. What else could it have been?"

"An accidental explosion of some kind. Had your friend made any kind of unusual modifications to his car lately?"

I considered for a second. "No, Joe's 'vette was a stormer, but he was running with over-the-counter speed parts and conventional hop-up techniques. Joe wasn't crazy enough to tinker with radical fuel additives like nitromethane for street use. And if he'd installed an oxygen or nitrous oxide booster tank, you'd have

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found it in the wreck. How about the battery? That's the only thing I can think of that might have blown like that."

Again Jones shook his head. "No. The battery was still strapped in the battery box. The casing was cracked from the crash, but there was no indication it exploded."

Slowly we paced around the hulk, studying it in mutual frustration. "There is one idea we had," the lieutenant continued. "What about some kind of a fuel leak and a buildup of gasoline vapor in the engine compartment? That could explain why we've got no explosive traces."

It was my turn to shake my head. "Nah, that wouldn't work, either. Joe didn't have a belly pan on his 'vette. In fact, he even had a set of cooling louvers cut into his hood. The front end of this car was wide open with a fifty-mile-per-hour slipstream blowing through it. A gas leak might have caused a fire, but there wouldn't be any place for a vapor pocket to build up."

The forensics man sighed. "What about an outside factor? Could he have run over something in the road?"

"A dozen other rods went down that same stretch of road immediately ahead of Joe. Nobody hit anything. Nobody saw anything."

"What about something being thrown at the car? Like a hand grenade."

"By who, and from where? We were coming down a steep-sided canyon, Lieutenant. It was almost straight up on one side and straight down on the other with no cover. There was no way anyone could have chucked anything at Joe without me seeing it."

Lee scowled. "Is there anything at all that might have happened just before the explosion? Anything out of the ordinary that you can remember?"

For about the thousandth time I reran the mental film of those last few seconds up on the highway. "It was just starting to get dark," I said finally. "I remember reaching down and turning on my lights. Then, *boom,* the 'vette blew. Hey! Maybe Joe saw my lights come on and that prompted him to hit his. Maybe something was wired into his headlight circuit."

"Possibly. The Corvette's headlight switch was turned to the 'on' setting. But we've examined every inch of the wiring harness and we can't find any point where anything has been spliced or patched into the electrical system. There's nothing there that shouldn't be there."

"Fan-damn-tastic."

Jones ran a hand through his thinning hair. "For the moment we're stumped. We'll be getting more chemical trace tests back later this morning and we'll be talking with the FBI's bomb specialists. If we come up with anything, we'll let you know. For now, I've got to get some sleep. I'm getting too old for this kind of thing."

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"Yeah, understood. Do you mind if I poke around the wreck a little?"

"Go ahead. We've got everything catalogued and dusted for prints. If you can spot something we've missed, we'll be grateful. Just wear a pair of lab gloves if you're going to touch anything."

I intended to touch a lot of stuff. I don't pretend to be a scientific genius like Lee Jones and his crew, but I do know cars, inside, outside, and sideways. And for the next couple of hours, that's exactly how I went over the trashed hulk of Joe's roadster.

I checked out the Corvette's 265-cubic-inch small-block engine, and its fuel lines, fuel pump, and carburetion system. I examined the brakes, the clutch, and the transmission linkages. I eyeballed the wiring from the battery terminals to the charred headlight plugs. I had a look at the horn, the heater blower, and the radio, going over anything Joe or Linda could have touched that might have triggered a detonator.

Nowheresville.

Eventually I found myself standing in the center of the garage floor, just staring at the crumpled nose of Joe's car and at the hundreds of bits of chrome and metal and Fiberglas surrounding it. The lieutenant was right. There was nothing there that shouldn't be.

Chrome and metal and Fiberglas . . . and then it hit me. What wasn't there that should have been?

Where was the glass?

I don't mean like from the windshield. There were plenty of faceted chunks of broken safety glass lying around on the tarps. I mean the shards of plain old everyday *glass* glass.

I had to study on that one for a while. Then I started for the Central Jail parking lot.

On the way out, I stopped to put in a call to Georgia Street Receiving Hospital. The antiseptic voice of the charge nurse delivered the words I didn't want to hear.

"I'm sorry, Deputy, but Miss Bell's condition continued to deteriorate overnight. She was returned to surgery at six o'clock this morning. She died on the operating table about half an hour ago."

"Has the family of her fiancé, Joe Summervale, been notified?"

"I believe so. The Summervales asked to be kept abreast of her condition and Miss Bell's family authorized it."

I tried to phone the Summervale house next. There was no answer.

I had to flash my star twice at pursuing motor officers as the '57 and I roared up the Arroyo Seco Parkway to Pasadena.

As I skidded to a halt in front of the house, I noted that Mr. Summervale's Plymouth sedan was the only car in the driveway. It took a couple of minutes of hard pounding on the front door to lift

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a response. Joe's father eventually appeared in his bathrobe, looking wrung out and bleary eyed.

"Where's Danny?" I demanded as the door swung open.

"Uh . . . Danny?" It took a second for the older man to get his tongue working right. "What's wrong, Deputy? Isn't he here?"

"His car's gone. When did he leave?"

"I don't know," the man replied thickly. "Last night I called our doctor to get something for my wife. He gave us both a couple of sleeping pills. Danny didn't say anything to us about going anywhere . . . What's the matter?"

"I don't have time to explain just now. Did you get a phone call from the hospital awhile ago?"

"The phone? No . . . yes. I remember the phone ringing. Danny must have answered it. I must have gone back to sleep."

"Oh great! Look, Mr. Summervale, I need permission to search your garage."

"Search the garage?"

I took that for a yes and bolted around the side of the house.

Joe had the garage set up as a pretty fair automotive workshop, well equipped and with everything in its place the way a good mechanic likes it. Thanks to that, it took me only about two minutes to find all of what I was looking for. The tools were still set out on the workbench, the power drill, the fine diamond bit, the needle inflater for a basketball pump, and the tube of epoxy sealant. And there were the tanks of a welding rig right over in the corner. The two empty sealed beam boxes from an automotive supply house were buried in the bottom of the trash can.

And then I saw the length of cut-up garden hose heaped in the corner and that killed the last of my doubts. I ran back to the house and grabbed the phone, dialing up L.A. County Dispatch.

"This is Deputy Kevin Pulaski, Metro Division, badge number seven *forty-eight*! I want an all-points bulletin put out on a black-primered nineteen thirty-seven Ford coupe, plate number . . . *Summervale, what in the hell is Danny's license number?* . . . Lincoln Ocean Ida four niner six!"

Car seemed to know that this race wasn't just for fun. My steel lady soared above the L.A. smog layer, treating the San Gabes like they were Pike's Peak with Duntov himself at the wheel. Her twin Carter four-barrels shrieked as they sucked air, a tremolo counter tone to the thunder of her dual exhausts. Belly to the ground, we clawed our way back up the Angeles Crest Highway, our tires smoking on the curves.

For hundreds of square miles around the L.A. basin, the word was flashing from police agency to police agency: the license plate, the description of the car, the description of the driver. A thousand

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cops were being called into the search for Danny Summervale. Strictly by the odds, any one of them had as much chance as I did of nailing the kid, but I wasn't going by the odds just then. I was riding on a gut instinct. One that was telling me to go back to the last place a sixteen-year-old boy had been happy.

The picnic ground was empty at this hour of the morning. There were no obvious signs of Danny or his coupe. I didn't expect there to be. He'd be looking for someplace quiet and out of sight for what he had to do.

I circled the '57 slowly around the drive-through loop of the picnic ground, telling myself to stay cool and look for tracks. I knew he had to be with the car. That was the one ace I held.

And then, there they were, fresh tread marks in the dust of a two-rut service road that lead off into the brush. The '57 and I followed, and man, I'll tell the world I was prayin'.

A second later and we were pulling in behind the primer-black Ford in its hiding place.

The coupe's engine was idling and the other half of that cut garden hose led from one of the exhaust pipes to the driver's-side window.

I bailed out of Car and raced to the coupe, tearing the hose out of the shop-rag gasket packed around it in the open wind wing. Danny lay sprawled across the front seat, unmoving, his lips already taking on that vivid scarlet hue of carbon-monoxide poisoning. The penciled note I didn't need to read rested on the dashboard.

The coupe's doors were locked and I thrust my arm in through the wind wing to flip the door handle. A choking petroleum haze billowed around me as I hauled Danny out of the car and carried him to clean air. Dumping the boy on the grass, I rolled him face-down and started artificial respiration, lifting his arms and shoving on his back to squeeze the poison out of his lungs.

As I labored, I found myself swearing at the kid as if he were a cranky engine.

"Breathe, dammit! . . . Joe wouldn't want this! . . . Breathe! . . . Your folks just lost one son, they're not going to lose two! . . . Come on! Light off, you stupid little son of a bitch! Breathe!"

The dual exhausts on Danny's rod saved his life. He'd only been catching the output from one bank of cylinders. I felt his ribs heave as he sucked in that first load of real oxygen and then the coughing spasm started, clearing his pipes. He was going to make it. Physically, anyway. For the rest, we weren't going to know for a while.

I sat him up and gradually the coughing segued into a series of shuddering sobs and broken words. He could say it now. There wasn't anything left to hide anymore.

"It was . . . supposed to be a joke! God, Kevin . . . it was just supposed . . . to be a joke!"

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"It's okay. I know it was, man." I rested my hand on his shoulder, helping him to stay upright. "Somebody told you about the acetylene gimmick and you rigged Joe's headlights on the morning of the rod run."

"Yeah . . . yeah. This guy told me that if you tapped and drilled a set of sealed beams . . . and filled them . . . with acetylene and oxygen, *the lights would pop when you turned them on . . . like firecrackers* . . . Oh Jesus God, Kevin! I swear it was just supposed to be a joke! I didn't know! I . . . didn't . . . know!"

"I know you didn't, Danny. The jerk that told you about that gag didn't mention that if you got the gas mixture wrong, a sealed beam could blow more like a stick of dynamite than a firecracker. It wasn't your fault. You've got to remember that, Danny. This wasn't your fault."

The kid looked up at me with wet and swollen eyes. "How did you find out?"

I shrugged. "From looking over what was left of Joe's car. Our lab guys were real good about picking up all of the pieces at the crash site. Every last little bit. But they didn't recover any glass fragments from the headlights. Not one. Both of the 'vette's sealed beams must have been blown completely to powder. There was nothing left to recover. The headlights themselves must have been the explosion point. I worked it out from there.

"When I found out that you weren't at your folks' place, and that you'd found out about Linda dying, well, I had a hunch that you might come back up here to do something really dumb."

Danny started to break up again, crumpling under a load that could destroy a grown man much less a kid just getting a hand on adulthood. "I killed them, Kevin. I killed Linda . . . and I killed my brother . . ."

The boy collapsed against me. "I need to die, too," he bawled, his face buried against my chest. "I shouldn't live! I don't want to . . ."

I locked my arms around him, holding him up, trying to give him something to hang on to. "Bullshit, Danny! You think Joe would want that? Hell no! He loved you and he was proud of you. He wouldn't want you to quit on him. He'd want you to keep going and get past this."

I felt the wetness of the boy's tears soaking into my T-shirt. "How?" Danny asked brokenly. "How do you get past something this bad, Kevin? How can I?"

I felt a few tears coming myself about then. Jesus! I didn't have anything going for this kind of action. This was a job for the big brothers of the world, for the Joe Summervales. But then Joe wasn't going to be around anymore.

"Well, you start by living, man," I found myself saying. "You start by living." ●

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THE FERRYMAN

by Paul Bishop

Why are the walls of every interrogation room in the city painted urine yellow? After twenty-five years of asking questions in these rooms, I have yet to uncover the truth of that. Was the color chosen as an appropriate accent by the interior-design genius from *House and Jail,* who also picked the interchangeable, yet dramatically scarred, wooden table and rickety chairs to round out the ambiance? Were the walls originally canary yellow, and had they soured as the thousands of lies and half-answers told within their cramped confines splattered over them?

Paul Bishop is the author of nine novels, five featuring LAPD detective Fey Croaker. He has also written for feature film and for such TV shows as *Law & Order, Diagnosis Murder, The New Detectives, Navy SEALs: The Untold Stories,* and many others. But writing is not Mr. Bishop's day job: He is a 25-year veteran of the LAPD, where he curently supervises the West L.A. Area Robbery Unit. ✝

I didn't know the truth of it, and it bothered me.

The bigger truth, however, was what Michael Thomas Horner was going to tell me—whether he wanted to or not—about the murder of Alexis Walker.

As he slumped in the chair next to me, the stench of fear coming off Horner was strong and ripe. He reeked. This was a good thing. He sat with his arms wrapped around himself, his skinny legs twisted so they crossed at the knees and again at the ankles. I think I hated him at that moment. No reason, just an accumulation of loathing I suddenly felt like divesting.

"Michael, my name is Detective Ferryman." I extended my hand. Horner reluctantly unwound an arm and presented his own hand to me like a limp fish. I enveloped it, gave it a firm shake, and held on to it as he tried weakly to pull it away. His fingernails were long, jagged, and dirty, all sharp edges. "I appreciate you voluntarily coming to the station with the uniformed officers. You do

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understand you are not under arrest and are free to leave at any time?"

"Yes."

I was between Horner and the door to the interrogation room. The only way he was leaving was in handcuffs after I'd wrung a confession out of him. But he didn't know that, and my statements would sound good when the audiotape of the interrogation was played back in court. Legally, it only mattered what Horner believed—and he'd just admitted he believed he was free to leave. It would be the first admission of many. That belief was also important, because if he believed he wasn't under arrest, then I didn't have to provide him with the Miranda admonition. Miranda only applies when two specific factors come together: A suspect has to know he is under arrest, and a detective has to be asking him questions about the crime for which he was arrested. Any other situation, the suspect is fair game.

I released Horner's hand and he placed his arm around his torso again, but not as tightly. I'd made a start on untying his body knots.

When I'd entered the interrogation room, I'd placed my chair on the side of the table where Horner was sitting. I was close enough to Horner to reach out and touch him with a minimum of effort. I never sat on the opposite side of the table. It gave the suspect something to hide behind, an unnecessary physical barrier for me to overcome before I could start on emotional barriers.

Leaning against the hard slats of the chair back, I kept my body open, facing toward Horner.

"How old are you, Michael?"

"Twenty-two."

"And how long have you worked at Barnes and Noble?"

"Two years."

I didn't give a rat's tail how old Horner was, or how long he'd worked at the bookstore. I already knew. I simply wanted to get him into the habit of answering my questions.

I didn't do much investigating anymore. I had evolved as a police detective to a position in which I asked questions, day after day, suspect after suspect, question after question until truth flowed like a river. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been up against a dam I couldn't tear down. I didn't always get a confession, but I got to the truth.

I worked all over the city, sometimes even the state, and once or twice the nation. If it was a hot case and a suspect had to be broken fast, the call went out for The Ferryman. Why me? Who knows? Who cares? I just have a knack—an ability to instinctively recognize when people aren't telling the truth, or the truth as they perceive it.

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When my son was ten, his teacher asked him what kind of work I did. My son said I was a human lie detector. The claim resulted in an uncomfortable parent/teacher conference—especially when I caught his teacher in a lie.

But I was tired of The Ferryman's mantle. So tired of the sordidness. So tired of being a human lie detector—of always knowing the truth. I didn't want to hear any more confessions. I wanted this done.

I'd decided to break this kid and then not do this anymore. I'd done my time. Somebody else could be *The Ferryman.* He or she would be called something else, but they could do the job. I was almost done. Just this one to go. One last egg to crack.

Horner fidgeted in his chair. It wobbled on an uneven leg that I had shortened myself. Everything that went on in an interrogation room I planned and controlled.

Ten minutes had passed in innocuous chitchat. Horner's legs were still crossed, but he had unfolded his arms and was running his nails along the edge of the table in front of him, smoothing the jagged edges. I sensed it was a comfortable habit. He was loosening up. Time to move slowly on.

"Who are your friends at the bookstore?" I asked.

"Don't have no friends. Who'd be friends with me?"

Good question. Horner might be twenty-two, but he was clearly socially inept. He wasn't retarded, just a very dim bulb—a goofball, with a skinny, pimply, awkward body, and greasy hair falling into his eyes. He wore baggy jeans held up by a too-long belt, the buckle engraved with a marijuana leaf. He was one of life's losers, and I knew he was guilty as hell.

"How about Alexis Walker?"

I was rewarded by seeing Horner's pupils dilate slightly. Guilty, guilty, guilty.

"She's nice. Talks to me sometimes."

"Talk to you last night?"

"No." The answer was immediate. Too immediate. He had anticipated the question, prepared his lie, letting it burst from his lips in an exploding mist of spittle.

I sat very still and quiet. Waiting. I spend a lot of time waiting.

Horner's chair skittered back and forth as he fidgeted. "She said hi when I took out the trash."

"You take out the trash from the cafe area? I thought your job was to shelve books?"

"I take the trash out, too."

"Do you only take out the trash when Alexis works the coffee counter?"

"No."

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I sighed aloud. "Michael, we were doing so well, but now you're lying to me. Don't do that, Michael. It upsets me when you belittle yourself that way." With somebody like Horner, you keep using their first name, personalizing the conversation, working on emotions of friendship they don't know how to control or understand. "You're not a liar, are you, Michael?"

"No."

Liar.

Alexis Walker's father had reported her missing when she didn't return home after her shift ended at eleven the night before. She was eighteen. Her father was told he could make a missing-persons report after twenty-four hours.

Two hours later, however, officers refereeing a dispute between two homeless men collecting aluminum cans had noticed her strangled body behind the bookstore dumpster. Her bra had been taken—a souvenir.

Homicide detectives quickly cleared the homeless men, and just as quickly established that Horner, the store's weirdo employee, had been seen skulking around Alexis's car after closing.

The detectives were understandably upset when their captain told them to call me in. They could crack an egg like Horner as easily as I could, but their captain wanted the clearance on his record and didn't want to take any chances. The Ferryman didn't miss. Get The Ferryman.

Detectives door-knocked Horner's house and got him to agree to come to the station voluntarily. The second he was out of sight in a patrol car, the detectives produced a warrant to search the residence where Horner lived with his father.

At the station, Horner had been placed in an interrogation room with the hidden audiotape running. Left alone, suspects have been known to talk aloud to themselves—"Don't tell them you killed her. Don't tell them." It makes for interesting reactions on the jury.

Rule of thumb: An innocent man placed alone in an interrogation room will remain alert, interested in what is going to happen next. A guilty man will put his head down on the table and go to sleep. Horner had immediately gone to sleep. Guilty, guilty, guilty.

Horner had no chance. He'd never faced a nightmare like me. I'd done literally thousands of interrogations, broken thousands of suspects.

It was time for a shift of focus. Horner had been picked up by the police once before. Getting him to talk about it could give me an angle when I brought the subject back to Alexis again.

I leaned forward casually and shuffled through some papers on the table. It was all for show. "Tell me about the time you were arrested."

"It was stupid," Horner said.

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I picked up one of the papers and scrutinized it. "You think being arrested for burglary is stupid?"

"It was kicked down to trespass."

So it had been. "Tell me about it."

"What do you want to know? They made me mad."

"Who? The people you burglarized?"

"Yeah. They was always messing up the store."

I looked at Horner. Waiting.

He glanced at me, read nothing on my face, uncrossed his legs at the ankles. I could feel the urge to justify himself bubbling up inside him.

"The guy was always coming in the bookstore, taking out books, reading them in the chairs, and then not putting them back. It wasn't just one or two books. It was ten, fifteen, twenty books, every day. I had to follow around behind him all the time putting the books back. He didn't care."

I saw from Horner's rap sheet there had been two counts filed against him. "There was somebody else, too."

Horner nodded. "Yeah. A woman. She was always buying lattes and leaving the cups on the bookshelves. She left stains everywhere—didn't care."

"What did you do?"

I saw what could have passed for a slight smile touch Horner's lips. "I went into his house and moved everything around. I didn't take nothing, just moved everything so he had to find it and put it back, just like he did to me."

"And the woman?"

"I stored up a week's worth of empty coffee cups and put 'em all over her house."

I almost laughed, but didn't—Horner was watching me.

"Bet you went through her underwear drawer while you were in the house—didn't you, Michael?"

"No. I don't do stuff like that."

"Of course you do. I would have gone through her underwear drawer."

Horner uncrossed his legs completely and turned to look at me. Bingo.

"You would have?"

"Sure." With only two exceptions, there is nothing in the rules saying an interrogator can't lie to a suspect. You can't tell a suspect you'll cut him a deal with the judge, and you can't tell him how much better he'll feel when he gets rid of the burden of his guilt by confessing. Any other lie is fair game.

The quickest way to get a suspect to confess is to present him with what he believes is a socially acceptable manner to explain his behavior. A woman was asking to be raped because of what she

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was wearing. Five-year-olds can be sexually precocious. An interrogator doesn't believe the justifications, but if a suspect believes you will judge him less harshly because of such an excuse, he will confess more readily.

If Horner thought I was an understanding kindred spirit, he'd spill his guts. I wouldn't have gone through the woman's underwear drawer, but I might have left dirty coffee cups all over her house.

"You told the truth when the officers arrested you?"

"Yes."

"That's good, Michael, because I need you to tell me the truth."

Horner turned his face away from me, but his body remained open.

"Michael?"

"What?"

"I need you to tell me the truth."

I waited.

"About what?" Horner asked eventually. He was stalling. He knew the answer. Guilt builds inside a guilty suspect like a geyser ready to explode. The more a suspect tries not to think about the truth, the more the truth forces its way to the forefront of his consciousness, and the harder it becomes not to talk about it.

I waited. Horner waited.

A minute passed before I said, "About Alexis," as if there had been no pause.

"She was nice," Horner said.

"Tell me about her."

Horner's face turned toward me again. "She came here from Houston. She worked in a Starbucks there. Her dad lives here with her stepmom. He promised her a job in his insurance firm, but it didn't work out."

He was tapering his story down, but I wanted to keep him talking. "Why didn't it work out?"

Horner shrugged. "She said her dad moved offices. The new office came with a secretary that a bunch of the people shared. Her salary came out of the rent. He didn't need Alexis anymore."

"Tough break."

Horner only nodded. I needed him verbal. "What did she do?" I asked.

Horner gave another shrug. "She came to work at the bookstore making coffee."

A heck of a career—*barista* for hire.

"Was she mad at her dad?"

"What do you think?"

Oh, oh. Hostility.

"I think she had every right to be mad. And I think you took out

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her trash to try and make her feel better." I paused. "Right?" Come on, keep answering questions. We're getting there.

"Yeah. She said she was going to fix her dad for screwing her over."

"Bet you wanted to help her."

"No. I'm not good at stuff like that."

The truth of that statement rang through my body with perfect pitch.

I waited. I don't know why, I just knew it was the right moment to wait.

A minute passed. Another minute passed.

A tear rolled down Horner's cheek.

"You know Alexis is dead, don't you, Michael?" My voice was quiet, soothing. I formed my questions now so they would only require a one-word answer.

Horner provided that one glorious word for me.

"Yes," he said.

"You killed her, didn't you, Michael?"

Horner's eyes widened—bad acting. "No. I found her when I took out the trash. I was scared. I didn't know what to do. I just left her there." The statement was untrue, but the tears were real.

I sat back in my chair. I didn't go in for the histrionics. I rarely raise my voice. I never, never hit a suspect. Remember, the tape is rolling. Verbal battering, physical assault, intimidation, they're all Sixth Amendment violations. Not only will you lose a suspect's confession in court, you'll also lose your job, and, these days, your freedom.

"Michael, God doesn't like it when you lie. It upsets me when you lie. I'd rather you not tell me anything than lie to me. Do you understand?"

Tears were flowing faster now. "Yes."

There was the soft bong of a bell outside the interrogation room. It was a signal to me. Horner didn't even hear it. Nobody would interrupt an interrogation, but if they had important information for me they sounded the bell. I responded only if I felt it appropriate.

Michael was primed, but I needed a trigger to push him over the edge. I'd risk the break to see what they had.

I stood. "You sit here and think about the truth, Michael. When I come back, we'll talk about the truth. I know you want to tell me, don't you?"

"Yes."

I opened the door and slid out. Nick Baxter, one of the homicide dicks on the case, was waiting for me. He'd just returned from serving the search warrant at Horner's house.

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"Cracked him yet, Ferryman?" Baxter's nose was clearly out of joint.

I chose to ignore the intonation. "What do you have?"

"We found the victim's bra in his closet." He thrust a stack of photos at me. "These were under the scrote's bed."

I flipped through the stack. They were photos of Alexis, clearly taken without her knowing. There were some Horner had even managed to take in the bookstore's women's restroom. And there were some taken through the window of Alexis's bedroom.

Horner wasn't anything special—just your standard neighborhood stalker who finally slipped off his track. He'd drawn the usual juvenile sexual crudities across the photos. I sighed. Guilty, guilty, guilty. I felt weighed down. More than ever, I wanted this done—wanted to walk away, never ask another question again. Can there be such a thing as too much truth?

I took the photos back into the interrogation room with me.

I moved over to stand next to Michael, my body achingly close to touching him.

He looked up at me. I could see the truth cut into every line of his features.

I let the photos dribble out of my hand onto the table. Each one fell like a guillotine blade chopping the head off a lie.

"Tell me the truth, Michael."

"You won't believe me."

"I will believe you, Michael. I know the truth already. I just want you to tell me. You killed Alexis, didn't you?"

"No."

That was not the answer I wanted. That was not the truth.

"What happened, Michael? Did you try to kiss her? Did she catch you taking photos? Did she make you mad like those customers?"

"No, no."

"You took her bra, Michael. I know you did. It was in your closet. Don't lie to me."

"Yes, I took her bra, but she was already dead."

"I know she was dead before you took the bra, Michael. You took it after you killed her. You needed something to remember her by, she was your friend."

"She was nice to me."

I sat down, reaching out to put my hand on Michael's shoulder. We were in this together, he and I. This was always the hardest part. Suspect gave you a part of themselves when they gave you the truth. You owned them at that point. They belong to you, but their truth becomes your responsibility and you have to give them a part of yourself in order to fulfill that responsibility.

"Michael, don't do this to yourself. Don't disappoint me. I know

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you know the truth. I know the truth. Truth is even better if it's shared."

"She said she was going to get her father. She said she had files. He was taking people's money but not paying their insurance stuff."

I didn't say anything. I just stroked the back of Michael's neck.

"She was going to tell."

"I know she was, Michael. She was going to tell about you." With my other hand, I gently separated the photos Michael had taken through Alexis's window. I moved them over in front of Michael. "She was going to tell about the photos, wasn't she, Michael. I know you were ashamed. I would have been, as well. It wasn't nice, was it, Michael?"

"No." He was blubbering slightly. We were oh so very close. I could feel the truth building. A little more and we'd go over the edge together. I just needed the first admission, the first break in the dam.

"You killed her, didn't you, Michael?"

My hand was on his shoulder now. I rocked it softly back and forth, making his head begin to nod in the affirmative. The audiotape turned silently in another room, the hidden mike picking up every word, but not my soft movements of encouragement.

"Tell me the truth, Michael. It's easy once it's out. Don't cut us with lies."

I was leaning forward now, one hand on Michael's thigh, one hand rubbing his back. "Tell me the truth, Michael," I whispered. "You killed Alexis, didn't you?"

There was a pause as silent tears fell—then, "Yes."

The truth. It was setting me free.

The interrogation room door opened. I looked up, angry. Baxter saw me comforting Michael. He smirked as if he'd caught two kids making love in the back of a car.

"Captain wants you."

"Get out," I said flatly.

"Now," Baxter said, but he closed the door.

I rubbed Michael's back again.

"It's okay. Thank you for telling me the truth."

"What will happen? Will I go to jail?"

"Yes," I said. He had earned the truth.

"I don't want to go to jail."

"I'm sorry," I said, and in some way I was.

I got to my feet. "I'll be back," I said, and left the room. I closed the door behind me, twisting the lock on the outside.

I walked down a short hallway and entered the main squad room. I saw Baxter and his partner standing by their desks. Captain Griffon was with them. He spotted me and signaled me over.

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"Thanks for coming out, Ferryman—appreciate your efforts, but we've had a break in the case."

"I know. You found the bra and the photos at Horner's house."

"No, not that," Griffon said. "The victim's stepmother just called in. Daddy committed suicide last night. Stepmom woke up and found him in his car in the garage with the engine still running—carbon monoxide poisoning."

My heart began to thump around in my chest like a bat trying to escape a cage.

"Suicide?" I could barely choke out the word. Michael had said she was going to tell. It had been the truth, but . . .

"Yeah. He left a note confessing to getting furious with his daughter because she had some files of his showing he wasn't paying his customers' insurance premiums. They fought, he strangled her, didn't know he was killing her until too late. Went home and did himself."

I turned and ran—ran back to the interrogation room, fumbled to twist the lock, twisted the door handle, and tried to push the door open.

It didn't move.

I put my shoulder to it and shoved. The heavy weight pressing back against my efforts put the strength of panic into me.

"Horner! Horner! Don't do this!" I knew at that moment yelling was fruitless.

Baxter put his shoulder on the door next to me, both of us pushing against the dead weight on the other side. The door gradually opened enough for me to slide through, tearing my shirt as I did so.

Horner was on the floor, his too-long belt attached to the door handle at one end, cutting deeply into his neck at the other. His face was a mottled purple.

Baxter forced his way through the door. I was just standing there.

"Move!" he said, pushing me roughly aside. He struggled to get Horner clear of the door, but the length of the belt, which had been just long enough for Horner to strangle himself, made moving the body awkward.

Baxter pulled out a pocket knife, using its dull blade to saw desperately through the taut belt. The cheap leather finally parted, dropping Horner's head to the floor with a sickening plop. Baxter tore the ligature free from Horner's throat and began mouth-to-mouth.

I just stood, staring. I knew truth—or once thought I did—and now truth told me it was far too late.

Horner had told me the truth. His truth. But I had turned it into my truth.

Guilty, guilty, guilty. ●

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WHITE PIGS

by Joseph Monninger

I heard the pigs oinking as Wally brought the lobster boat to dock. They made a lot of noise, like sea gulls getting strangled. Wally shook his head as he tossed me the line.

"He fed the marijuana to one of the pigs, Detective Poulchuck," Wally said to me. "They watched him from the Coast Guard cutter. He fed the pot to one of them."

"Smart guy," I said.

"No evidence, no arrest."

"The pot's still in the pig."

"Yeah, but which one?" Wally asked. "It's a needle-in-a-haystack kind of thing."

He stepped aside. Down on the deck, in holding pens, twenty pigs stared at me. White pigs, I thought. They looked kind of sweet. I had heard about using pigs before. Guys took shipments off the New Hampshire or Maine coast, fed the pigs the pot in baggies, then sent the pigs on a produce truck to wherever they had a market. Then they killed the pigs, probably smoked a joint, and ate a good pork dinner.

"You want to kill twenty pigs?" Wally asked. "We'll have a hell of a pig roast."

"Use the meat to raise money for the Benevolent Association?"

"Something like that."

Wally was my deputy. He smiled. He liked being out on boats. He grew up in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. I grew up in Plymouth, New Hampshire, a mountain town. I didn't particularly care for lobster boats. But I liked pigs. I climbed on board. The pigs were identical. One after another, pig after pig, all white, all with curly eyelashes. I thought about Clarence Maines, an old pig

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farmer I knew. He'd know how to get the pot out.

"I'm going to make a call," I said, the boat going up and down beneath me. "Why don't you get some boys down here and we'll load up the pigs?"

"Already done," Wally said. "The cutter radioed in. Got a farmer from over in Rochester on his way."

"I'm going to make a call," I repeated.

"You do that," Wally said. "I'll tie this off."

I got Mrs. Maines. She didn't recognize my name, but she said Clarence was out back. Out back, I knew, could mean he might be anywhere in twenty acres or so of land.

"I'll beep him," she said.

"Clarence has a beeper?" I asked.

"Yes, he does. He likes to stay modern about those things."

"Okay."

"Let me put you on hold."

She put me on hold. I watched the boat bobbing at its dock. Some other lobstermen came over to watch Wally tie up. They weren't happy. They wore rubberized overalls, yellow, and turtlenecks. It was October so it was already cold out on the water. One man smoked a pipe. The others held coffees.

"Clarence Maines," Clarence Maines said.

"This is Detective Poulchuck. Do you have a minute, Clarence?"

"What do I have if I don't have a minute?" Clarence asked. "You ever think of that?"

"I've got a pig question," I said.

"You raising pigs?" he asked, then I suppose he covered the mouthpiece of the phone, because I heard him shout something to someone. When he came back on, he said, "Got a boy up here running a bush hog and he doesn't know his ass from his elbow."

"Clearing land?"

"Naw, just keeping it free of saplings. You know. So you have a pig question? I thought you were transferred down south over to the coast."

"I was," I said. "That's why I'm calling."

I explained the situation.

"And you don't know which one it is?" Clarence said. "They're likely to bind up if they can't pass it."

"I guess so."

"You could give them some kind of physic."

"We don't want to kill twenty pigs, is the main thing," I said.

"Funny situation," Clarence said. "You could X-ray them. You consider that?"

"No, I didn't think of that."

"Go to a vet's office and he could do it."

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"That might be what I should do. Anything else you could recommend?"

"It's just good meat," Clarence said. "Nothing much to killing twenty pigs."

"I don't think I want to kill twenty pigs."

"You a vegetarian, Detective?"

"Thanks a lot, Clarence," I said.

"Spank the lot of them," he said. "That's what I'd do."

Wally said, "I just talked to the Coast Guard and they're now saying they're not even sure the guy fed the pot to the pigs. He might have thrown it over."

"What are you talking about?"

"The guy's brother is a lawyer. He's saying all we have is a bunch of pigs and a lobster boat. No one taped anything, I mean. It's all just hearsay."

"They have any advice?"

"They said we have to recover the pot or release the lot of them."

"Back to the guy?"

Wally nodded.

Just then a livestock truck pulled into the dock area.

"Get him," I told Wally.

Wally went off and brought the driver back. The guy inched his truck as far as it would go down the pier, then climbed out. Lobster crates jiggled at the hum of the truck. He was a big fellow with bad teeth. He wore bib overalls and Sorel boots. The bib overall had a nameplate on one strap: *Porky.*

"These the pigs?" Porky asked, notching his chin toward the boat.

"Yeah," I said. "You know much about pigs?"

"Hate the bastards."

"But do you know anything about them?"

The guy, Porky, shrugged.

"You know how to make a pig upchuck?" Wally asked. He had come up to help out. He took one step to the side when a gull swung down and nicked onto a light stanchion. The gull looked at us sideways as if he was hearing our confession.

"Listen," said Porky, "I come to load them. That's it. You want a vet, you better call one."

I asked, "How you going to load them?"

"Got a chute."

"All right, start loading them. We'll figure something out."

Wally said, "The Coast Guard said the guy said he was bringing some pigs back from an island offshore. That's all. I don't know the name of the island. But there's a pig farm out there. The story's not too bad. It's a good cover."

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"Help Porky load them," I said, "while I figure out a couple of things."

"Okay, Detective."

I stood watching while Porky and my deputy, Wally, lined up a livestock chute. The chute had a telescopic extension that could stretch twenty or thirty feet. The pigs could go right up the ramp and into the livestock truck.

Porky bounced it a couple times and yelled back and forth with Wally. Wally angled it one way, then back, then settled it. Porky yelled to open both gates. The pigs didn't enter at first. They appeared suspicious. Then Porky yelled *sueeeeeeeeeee pig pig pig pig sueeeeeeeeee* and rattled two pans together. It replicated the sound of slopping, I guess, because the pigs grunted and started squeezing their way up toward the truck.

The pigs were about half loaded when a station wagon pulled up. I saw the insignia when the woman opened the door. It was the New Hampshire Humane Society. The woman wore a camera around her neck.

"Uh-oh," Wally said, seeing the same thing that I saw.

"I see her," I said.

"I bet the lawyer brother called her. He's smart, I'll give him that."

"Keep the pigs moving," I said.

One of the lobstermen whistled at the woman. She was young and pretty, blond. Her shoulders were wide. She wore a red mackinaw and jeans, barn boots on her feet. She looked over the pig ramp before she came to talk to me.

She snapped two pictures at the pigs, then shook her head.

"Who called you?" I asked her.

"Are you in charge?"

"The pigs are in charge."

"Funny. Are you?" she asked.

"I guess I am."

"And what's your name?"

"And what's *your* name?"

She looked at me. Then she raised her camera and clicked a few more pictures. I was grateful Porky didn't use a prod on them. Wally slid the chute door closed once the last pig had left the boat. The last pig shuttled up the ramp quickly, nervous at being the final one to leave.

"I'm Greta Niedleman with the Humane Society," the woman said when she finished taking pictures.

"I'm Detective Poulchuck. Who called you?"

"It was anonymous."

"Of course it was," I said.

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"Many of our tips about animal abuse are anonymous. I'm surprised you don't know that, Detective."

"I have a lot to learn."

"Why are you confiscating the pigs?"

"We think someone fed them pot."

"Loose or in baggies?"

"Baggies," I said. "You know how to make them evacuate?"

"There are different ways," she said. "Are you certain they swallowed the baggies?"

"That's what the Coast Guard says."

"Just hold them for a while, can't you? See what happens?"

"No pot, no crime. No reason to hold anyone."

"Clever method," Greta said. "And you'd have to turn the pigs back to the boatman?"

"Exactly."

"And he could take the pigs somewhere new, right? I get it now."

The pigs squealed. Their voices got caught in the wind and the whole mess swirled around. Wally and Porky started pushing the telescopic chute back into the truck. Porky gave the commands. When it was stowed properly, Porky came over and asked me where he should take the pigs.

"We're thinking," I told Porky.

"Well, the clock's running. Just wanted you to know. I'm paid for my time."

"Of course you are," I said.

"Fair's fair," Porky added.

"What else would fair be?" I said. I asked Greta, "What would you do?"

"Are you really asking?" she said, her camera halfway to her eye.

"Yes, of course."

"I'd forget about it," she said quickly, "it's just pot."

"You got a point," I said. "You should run for governor."

"The Kennedys got rich rumrunning," she said. "It's the same thing."

I looked at her. I was still thinking about the pigs. They made a hell of a racket. Three or four of them had their snouts pressed through the bars of the truck, flinging drool and hay onto the dock. The sideways gull listened from up on the stanchion. Porky smoked a cigarette. Every time I looked at him he pointed to his watch, tapped it, then nodded his approval that the clock was running.

Wally came over and said the Coast Guard had delivered the owner of the boat to the old Pease Air Force Base. He was on his way to collect the pigs. His brother, the lawyer, had weaseled in and was now with him. The staties were bringing him. Wally

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reported that the dispatcher said that the Coast Guard said that whatever I was going to do I had better get doing.

"How do I know which pig it was?" I asked. "This is crazy."

"Maybe one of the pigs has the munchies," Greta said. "That's the best way to tell."

"You got pigs?" I asked Porky.

He shook his head.

"How about a holding lot?"

He shook his head again.

"Okay, let me ask you this. You know anyone who keeps white pigs like these?"

"Sure," he said and flicked his cigarette into the water. It hissed as it went out. "Guy up in Dover. Big operation."

"Let's go, then."

"You want me to take them over there?" Porky asked.

"Yes."

Porky shrugged, then climbed into his truck. The lobster traps jiggled again when he pulled off the pier. One of the lobstermen in yellow gave me the finger as we pulled out.

We drove behind the pig truck. Greta What's-her-face drove behind us. It took us fifteen minutes to arrive at a large farm that smelled like pigs. It was a dirty place. I counted three Ford trucks that had been cannibalized for parts sitting in the front yard. A man in a filthy Carhart jacket stood framed in a large barn door when we pulled into the dooryard. He had a cigar in the center of his face. He looked like Robert Frost's backward brother.

"Get her out of here," he said, pointing to Greta. He had seen the Humane Society insignia. "Those people are nothing but trouble."

He said it before we had climbed out of the squad car.

"Wally," I said, "go tell Greta to get out of here. Tell her it's private property."

Wally nodded.

Porky hopped down from his truck and introduced me to Bill Froglich. Bill didn't shake hands. He was filthier than he first appeared. The barn behind him didn't look great, either. But spooling around the barn on either side were two herds of white pigs. They resembled the ones we had in the truck.

"Why should I help you out?" Bill asked after I explained the situation. "Who the hell cares who smokes pot? I sure as hell don't."

"We'll pay you for holding them," I said.

"How much?" Bill asked.

"What's fair?"

"They might have disease. Could ruin my whole herd, don't you know?"

"How much?"

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"Fifty dollars a day," he said. "Plus feed."

"Okay," I said to Porky. "Put them in that pen over there."

I pointed to the pen on the right side of the barn. Porky hopped back in the truck. Bill Froglich walked over to the pigpen and kicked at the fence a little. The white pigs backed away, then swarmed forward again. I watched their pink noses sniffing through the fence slots. From out on the road, when the pigs were quiet, I heard Greta snapping pictures of us all.

The pot smuggler was a normal-looking guy. Probably a fisherman, I figured, down on his luck. He had a reddish beard and fairly long hair, but the hair, except for a ponytail, was curled up under a black watch cap. His name was Danny. He didn't seem nervous or distraught, despite the day he had had. His lawyer brother, on the other hand, couldn't shut up. The brother was a slick guy in a gray suit who also wore a ponytail. His tie was supposed to be funny. It had a picture of Curly, of the Three Stooges, poking his fingers at you as if he wanted to dot out your eyes.

He gave me a business card. The card said his name was Albert Torsey. It also said he handled domestic litigation, which was a fancy way, I guess, of saying he was a divorce lawyer.

"Very funny," Albert said as soon as he saw the pigpen. "Mixing them in like that. But the pigs are tattooed on the ear. Are you supposed to be tricky?"

"So go get them," I said. "Probably a little muddy in there. You might want to change shoes."

"This is my brother's livelihood you're playing with," he said. "And the joke's on you. If one of those pigs did vomit up something, how would you know they were our pigs that did it? Why not the other guy's pigs?"

"You got me," I said. "You guys are just too smart."

"Pigs with pigs," Albert said. "Ironic, isn't it?"

"I guess we'll just impound them," I said. "Check for disease."

"You got no right," Albert said. "You're interfering with a man's right to happiness."

"We'll keep them for a week. You get a court order, we'll release them."

"You're just jerking our chain," Albert said. "I can get a court order. And I can bring suit against you for harassment."

"Pig harassment?"

Wally started yelling then that two pigs had passed plastic bags. One of the pigs hadn't quite succeeded and the bag hung half out of the pig's butt. It was gross. We all watched. Danny, the lobsterman-turned-dope-smuggler, shook his head.

"Not my pigs," he said.

"Of course not," I said.

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We cleaned the bags on a feed table next to the barn. Wally hosed them down. I held them with a pair of pliers Froglich gave me. I stacked the bags when they were cleaned. It was merely a guess, but I figured it rang out to over a pound in nine baggies.

"You going to make it easy?" I asked Danny.

He looked at his brother. His brother shook his head.

"Our position, those bags could have come out of any pig here. You screwed yourself, Detective."

"Might be prints on the bags," I said. "Fibers. Come on, you watch the cop shows. Figure it out."

"They got molasses on them," Wally said, "the bags. Something gooey. I guess they get the pigs to eat them that way."

"We can run it down," I told the brothers. "It's a pound of dope, some dealing charges, but it's pot. You cooperate, things will go easier."

The brothers looked at me. I waited for a second, then called the office. I told the office to call out to the island. I got a police officer named Smith on the line. Smith was a constable, he told me. I asked him to go over to Danny's house and call me back. He said he would after I gave him the number.

"Here's a bet," I said when I clicked off. "You're a bachelor, aren't you, Danny?"

Danny nodded.

"What I bet is, a guy like you doesn't have a ton of things around to save leftovers. That's just not the way life is. Single guy, you eat day to day. I'm making no judgments. I'm telling you how we figure things out, okay?"

He shrugged. Albert made a gesture that said I was amusing myself sexually.

"My guess is, you bought a box of baggies brand-new. Figured they would be better, anyway. And then you pulled out the ones you needed. Now, what do you think a judge will say when I can tell him that your baggies match the brand that were in the pigs? And here's the other thing. I'll bet you didn't put the baggies away, so they're sitting right out on the kitchen table. Something like that. So what is a judge going to do when you have nine baggies out of a roll of say twenty-four missing and we find nine baggies in the pigs? You think that amounts to circumstantial evidence? You lump that with people watching you from the Coast Guard cutter, and what do you think?"

My cell rang. Constable Smith said he was standing in the kitchen of Danny's house.

I looked at Danny. He looked at Albert.

"GLAD Bags," Constable Smith said when I asked. "On the counter here, next to the sink."

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Greta sat with the door open on her car, changing film.

"Film is made with petroleum products which in turn cause the devastation of pristine environments which in turn kills off habitat which in turn kills off animals," I said. "Something like that?"

"Funny," she said.

"The pigs had pot in them," I said. "Thought you'd want to know."

"Oh, you're a hero."

"Only to pigs. They don't like swallowing plastic bags."

"I understand your situation, Detective," she said. "I'm not as green as you think."

I shrugged. She stood. She let the camera hang around her neck.

"Do they?" I asked.

"Do they what?"

"Lobsters. Do they scream when you cook them?"

"Wouldn't you?"

"So I guess buying you a lobster dinner is out of the question," I said.

She looked at me. Then she lifted the camera. She snapped three pictures.

"Today it is," she said. "You can't tell about tomorrow." ●

"MY CASE IS EXACTLY THE OPPOSITE.... I'VE SUFFERED A LOT FROM BEING UNDERSTOOD."

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

THE FOURTH WAY

by Neil Schofield

Grace Westmacott had received a letter and Madge Best was reading it. Madge was large, anxious, in her fifties, and unused to reading letters, but she had plucked up the courage to open it at last, sitting in the window of the large sitting room.

The letter was impressive, written on heavy bond paper. The letterhead was even more impressive. Madge began to read it carefully, as she always did: Start at the top and carry on down the page until you reach the bottom, then stop.

The letterhead read: "Sniving, Preacle & Biles, Solicitors and Commissioners for Oaths."

There was an address, and a very respectable one, too, in London Wall, where, she knew, lots of large firms of City lawyers lived and had their being.

But there was more. Because Sniving, Preacle, and presumably even Biles could also boast that they were in the happy position of "incorporating Upshot, Wassail, Pervious, Crust & Co."

Not only that; at some point they had become "successors to

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Draggett, Nawkish, Merriment, Wigg & Partners."

Madge had the feeling that her eyeballs were steaming up on the insides, if that were possible.

And if anyone succeeded in getting through these serried ranks, they could call on the real heavy-hitters: their "New York Agents: Rugspell, Faintly, Mouseman & Biddlebaum Associates, Inc."

She let the letter drop to the Persian carpet.

"Inc.," she said loudly, "oh, yes, Inc.! And well might they be. No, really, I may not know much, but I know what is what, and you can't tell a sausage by its overcoat."

A former finalist in the *EQMM* Readers Award competition, Neil Schofield has a distinctive, offbeat sense of humor and style, and an eye for quirks of character. Once a writer for corporate videos and events, Mr. Schofield now devotes his time to fiction. He lives in Le Havre, France, far enough from his native England that he's found a clear perspective from which to view and write about it. ✝

She went to the drinks table and poured herself two large glasses of Tio Pepe, in quick succession. She eyed the letter lying white and threatening on the floor. What did they *want,* all these people? She had the feeling of being surrounded by a host of chattering dwarfs all nipping her legs and biting her feet with their tiny, sharp, pointy teeth.

The thing was, this letter was not welcome. Not at all. It was the first letter one had received for ever such a long time. She thought briefly about going upstairs and asking Grace about this and then decided no. She would handle this on her own, as she had handled all the other tasks and duties that were incumbent on her as head of this household. Current head.

She poured a third glass of sherry and walked over to the letter. She picked it up and deliberately kept her eyes away from the letterhead. She didn't want to go through all that again. She read, instead, the bit that started "Dear Mrs. Westmacott."

Dear Mrs. Westmacott, it said,

It is my solemn duty to inform you that as agents of the executors of the will of a certain party, now deceased, and after exhaustive enquiries undertaken with the authority of the said executors, we have positively identified you as legatee under the testament of the said defunct, whose identity, however, we must for the moment withhold.

In order to apprise you of the circumstances surrounding the inheritance, I should like to call upon you at 7 P.M., Thursday the

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12th. You do not, according to our enquiries, seem to have a telephone, listed or otherwise. (Quite right. That was one of the first things she had done away with.) *If the above appointment is not convenient, please feel free to telephone me at the following number.* There followed a number which differed, she noticed, from the number on the letterhead.

I would impress upon you, Mrs. Westmacott, that this matter is, at this date, extremely delicate, and would ask that you speak of it to no one, including the members of your immediate entourage, if any.

I cannot overemphasize the capital necessity for confidentiality.

I look forward to meeting you on the 12th, should I not hear from you in the interim.

Yours sincerely,

And it was signed: *Benjamin Twohig.*

Try as she might, she could find no mention of a Twohig in the dread letterhead. So presumably, Benjamin was entombed in the "Partners" of the ill-fated Merriments and Wiggs, or enmeshed in the "Co." of Upshots and Perviouses. She hoped he wasn't an "Associate" of Mouseman. She had never trusted Americans.

But there we were. A letter. And what was to be done about it, that was the question. The thing was, you see, that she didn't quite know how to handle this. This was totally unexpected. She'd handled all the rest of it, plugged all the holes she could think of, made the arrangements necessary to keep at bay all the multitudes of people who want to see one, talk to one, get one to sign things, buy things, borrow things. All that was taken care of.

So, what were the options? She could ring the number in the letter and tell this Twohig that she wasn't interested, to stay away and never contact her again. But was that really likely? Would anyone really do that, when large inheritances were being talked of? And Twohig might not be put off so easily as that. He might be a sticker.

All right, then, she could ignore the letter completely. But he'd turn up, wouldn't he? Unless he heard from her, he'd turn up. She could turn all the lights out and pretend not to be there, and then he'd go away. But, horrors, he might not. He might go nosing around. The nearest village was a long way away, but even so, he might stir things up. Ask questions. And that she couldn't have. She might lose all this, and she'd worked so hard for it.

She walked slowly round the sitting room, touching things. There were, it was true, a lot of things to touch. It was a large room, with large windows, and it was filled to bursting with *stuff.* Things that Grace Westmacott had brought back with her from her frequent travels with her husband, the minor diplomat, who had been sent, it seemed, to just about every flea-bitten outpost of

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the Empire. And everywhere they went, they brought back *stuff*. There were African masks and wooden sculptures; there were wooden chests from Southeast Asia that smelt of camphor when you opened them; there were clocks and mirrors, and there were whole tribes of totally useless gewgaws, scrimshaw, and whatnots. In particular, there were lots and lots of Benares brass knick-knacks: trays and bowls and boxes and long-spouted coffeepots and a huge brass ashtray standing on a pedestal with a massively heavy base. God knows why they'd brought *that* back, because the Westmacotts had never smoked, to her certain knowledge.

And the photographs! There seemed to be hundreds of them, all featuring Mr. Westmacott, small, stern, bespectacled, and severely moustachioed, in various tropical garbs, but always with Grace, large and sternly imperial at his side, and usually surrounded by hordes of Indians, Chinese, Southeast Asians, and lots and lots of Africans of assorted persuasions, including, she noticed, a bunch of Pygmies.

When Grace Westmacott had first brought Madge into this cluttered room for their first and only interview, she had almost had an attack of claustrophobia, there was so much *stuff*. It was strange, because the house itself was in the middle of nowhere, miles from the nearest village. Madge had a hell of a time getting a taxi to bring her out here, along all the flooded country lanes, through all the sodden fields with just the occasional dripping cow for interest. And out of all that empty, damp nowhere, you came into what looked like a museum of the Third World.

But then she had come to like it. It was comforting, all this dark solidity. It made her think of her grandmother's house. Madge's grandmother had had a room very much like this one. Even to the dark, heavy, velvet curtains over the great windows and another on a curtain rail over the door to keep out the draughts. And a big fireplace. It was very agreeable sitting in there, sipping a glass of sherry and chatting.

Grace had employed Madge on the spot, without even taking up any of the references she had brought along. She appeared to like Madge. Perhaps that was because they were both tall, about the same size, and with the same sort of calm features. Grace clearly felt comfortable having an echo of herself around the place, dancing attendance.

At the end of the interview, Madge had thought, for a pleasant few minutes, that this was somewhere she could settle down and take things easy. After thirty years of nursing ungrateful old biddies and being paid a pittance for her trouble, having sacrificed her own chances for a home and a husband and family of her own, perhaps at last this was somewhere she could duck down behind the parapet, wait it out, go on building her tiny savings until her

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pension was due, and then—well, then she'd see.

For some euphoric moments, she had allowed herself to imagine cosy evenings in this room in front of a roaring log fire, with Grace Westmacott doing tapestry and herself reading something pleasant and improving.

But Grace had soon made it clear that this room was not for her. A housekeeper and paid companion, which is what she had advertised for, was just what the name implied, and not a bosom buddy. Madge's domain was to be at the top of the house, a tiny bedroom coupled with what Grace Westmacott was pleased to call a sitting room, but which was actually little better than a box room. And which was connected by an ancient and intricate system of bells to Grace's bedroom, the sitting room, the kitchen—everywhere, in fact, so that Grace could summon Madge at any hour of the day or night when she had a malaise.

It turned out that Grace had lots of malaises, and what she needed was not so much a paid companion but an insomniac army of major-domos, footmen, servants, nurses, and dogsbodies. She would call from her bedroom at four o'clock in the morning when she couldn't sleep and needed a warm milky drink and her drops. She would call from the sitting room just as Madge was settling down to watch her tiny television, to ask her to find her tapestry, which was sitting right there three feet away from her on the sideboard, goddammit. She would call at any time on any whim, and after two or three months of this, Madge began to think she would chuck it in because Grace Westmacott was a pain in the bum.

But then one day while trudging up to the bedroom at ten in the morning with Grace's breakfast, she thought of the drops. Grace was under doctor's orders and the doctor had prescribed medicine to keep her calm—and, she suspected, to keep her from pestering the doctor. The medicine was in the form of drops to be taken in warm water. Every morning, after she had taken away the breakfast things, Madge had to re-uptrudge with the tray carrying a glass of warmed water, the little bottle, and a spoon.

While Grace, the great lump, lay in her peignoir on the bed, Madge would drip the prescribed number of drops into the glass and stir it. Grace would take it with a weary sigh, down it, and that was that.

The next morning, very daringly, Madge had doubled the dose. And to her delight, Grace had kept to her room all day, only leaving it to visit the bathroom. Madge had spent the whole of that wonderful, secret day in the forbidden sitting room, sitting on the sofas, looking out of the windows, even taking a dangerous glass of sherry. But she needn't have worried. Grace hadn't emerged until the next day, wearing a slightly puzzled air as though she wasn't quite sure who she was. And then Madge knew she had the

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answer. Of course, she didn't dare double the dose every day to begin with; God knew what was in the stuff. Every other day would be enough.

But two days after that, she did it again. And again Grace stayed up there in her room. Madge had looked in halfway through the day, ostensibly to ask about lunch, but Grace was lying on her back, staring at the ceiling, and clearly didn't want to be bothered with lunch. So Madge had spent a fruitful day wandering round the house, and especially examining the contents of the large bureau in what she supposed the late Mr. Westmacott had called his study. There she found out everything she needed to know. And in the evening she sat in front of a roaring log fire in the sitting room and did a little planning. There was very little to plan, actually. Because, in fact, hardly anybody came to the house. Grace Westmacott seemed to be almost completely alone in the world.

There were deliverymen, of course, who brought the groceries, oil for the central heating; there were the men who came to read the meters and so on, but she already knew them and they never came in the house.

There was the doctor, but on his last visit he had made it clear, just by the way he spoke, that he was sick to death of Grace Westmacott.

The only real potential spoke in the wheel was the firm of solicitors who guarded and watched over the tiny trust account which Grace lived on. But they were far away in London. All they did was pay the household bills that Grace sent to them, and transfer a monthly sum into her current account at Lloyd's Bank in Welding. At the end of each financial year, they sent an account of income from investments and property and disbursements, together with the current total of the Westmacott fortune, which, Madge remarked, was hardly substantial. It was enough to maintain Grace and the house, but there was no room for frivolous overspending. Mr. Westmacott seemed to have brought home a lot of native artifacts from his travels, but not much bacon.

And then, finally, there was Cousin Fulbright, the only relative Grace Westmacott appeared to have in the world: a distant cousin who came to visit every two weeks or so. He was a seedy little man, who always wore the same dusty charcoal-grey suit and a brown trilby far too jaunty for a man his age. Madge was always banished to her garret on Cousin Fulbright days, so they had never met face-to-face. As far as she knew, Fulbright wasn't even aware of her existence. She had peeped from her window more than once to watch him arrive and leave. There's a man on his uppers, she thought, and, indeed, the heels of his shoes were worn away almost completely. Madge didn't know what went on during

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the conversations he had with Grace, but from the state of him she could guess. And she suspected that her ratlike existence on these occasions was due to Grace's reluctance to reveal that she could afford a housekeeper. The hallway always smelt vaguely of gin after Fulbright's visits.

To begin with, she did a little test. She went down to the doctor's with the old prescription for the medicine. She said to the doctor, "I know it's not usual, but perhaps you could give me another prescription."

The doctor had looked at her. "She seems to have gone through it quite quickly. She is sticking to the dose?"

She sighed and said, "Well, yes, but I found her the other night pouring it into a plant pot. I don't know how long that's been going on. If you think you ought to see her . . . ?" She left a long, inviting pause.

The doctor sighed in his turn. "No need for that. I'll give you a refillable prescription. But keep an eye on her. If she shows any signs of dependence I'd like to know. This isn't something you can play about with. I'll pop up and see her, say in three months." Which, as they both knew, meant never.

Good.

The next thing was the bank. The following day, she went up to Grace's bedroom. Grace was lying in her now usual position staring at the ceiling.

She said, "Mrs. Westmacott, I'm sorry to disturb you, but we're running short of petty cash. I've brought the cash book for you to see."

Grace waved a weary hand. "I haven't the energy. Just go and get some money from the bank."

"I'll need something from you," Madge said, "an authority. Something to say I'm entitled to draw money from your account."

In the end, she had brought a sheet of writing paper and Grace had scrawled an authority entitling her housekeeper, who would be armed with proof of identity, to draw on her account. And then she signed a cheque for the housekeeping money.

The bank manager had absolutely no problem in honouring the instructions of his valued client, asked after her kindly, and counted out the notes personally.

So that was that. As simple as could be.

Cousin Fulbright was even simpler. Three days before his next scheduled visit, she dug out his address from Grace's thin address book, tucked fifty pounds in an envelope with a note "signed" by Grace, and sent it off. It was as she had thought. That was all he came for, so he didn't come. She followed the same routine every fortnight after that, and she had never seen Cousin Fulbright since.

She didn't intend, of course—not at the beginning, anyway—

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that Grace should live a vegetable life. The trouble was, it was so easy. She counted out the drops in the morning, doubled the dose, and added one for luck, and knew that for the rest of the day, she would be free to do whatever she liked: wander the house, do a little light housekeeping, potter about the garden, and in the evening, rest tranquilly in what was now *her* sitting room, in front of the fire, while Grace lived her dream existence upstairs.

The best part was that the drops seemed to have diminished Grace's appetite. She didn't eat half of what she had eaten at the start. So the trays that Madge carried upstairs grew lighter and lighter. In fact, at one point Madge became alarmed at the state Grace was getting into, thin as a rake, her skin almost transparent. She slackened off the dose for a while after that, and fed her up a bit. But then the bloody woman perked up and started to become her usual gritty self, and Madge had reinstated the regime. She seemed now to have found exactly the right dosage, enough to keep Grace docile and sleepy, but not enough to send her into some sort of anorexic spiral.

She had also closely studied the photographs in the sitting room. It really was quite amazing, the resemblance between them. She understood why Grace had accepted her just like that. They could have been sisters. They were both large, with vaguely the same sort of broad, plain face. She had begun to experiment with her hair and had found exactly the style that Grace affected: a sort of chignon that had gone out in the early 1900s, but that Grace had clung on to.

One morning, when Grace had lapsed into her dreamy post-breakfast existence, Madge had gone into her dressing room and picked out a couple of Grace's dresses: a long black velour number and a day dress in a flowered print.

That evening she put on the print dress and regarded herself in the sitting-room mirror. The resemblance was total. And not just for her, either. She went down next day to the bank, and happened to pass the doctor, who was just coming out of the village pharmacy. He looked at her, nodded, looked again, and said, "Glad to see you looking well again, Mrs. Westmacott."

She had stopped the dressing-up in public after that, because you never knew.

So there we were, and where was the harm? Grace lived quite happily upstairs, Madge lived ecstatically downstairs. And nobody knew or cared. After two months Madge had gone to Buckshot, ten miles away, and had opened a savings account at the Bicester & Beccles Building Society, using Grace's name, birth certificate, and passport. Just as an in-case. After that she paid in small sums every week, small amounts that she took as a commission off the top of the housekeeping. It didn't seem very much, until she

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realised that she could increase the housekeeping by a little if she wanted to, and the next time she signed the cheque, she doubled the amount and put the overage in her own account. As a bonus, and this was the real reason for opening the account in the first place, there was the occasional small dividend cheque from one or other of the piddling investments the late Mr. W. had made. Very daringly, because she knew that she was now crossing a certain line, she paid them into her Grace's account.

So the little savings account was growing, not very quickly, but it was growing. Still, it was a long way from what she would need in the retirement which loomed every day worryingly larger on the horizon.

And now, six months later, and after all that hard work, here was this letter. Apart from the upheaval it represented, it also irritated her. Grace Westmacott, who had done nothing in her life apart from following, doglike, behind her husband wherever he went, and who now lived the life of Riley, this woman was now apparently coming into an inheritance. There was no justice. None at all.

And why was there so much secrecy about this famous inheritance? Benjamin Twohig hadn't even given the name of the dear departed. That wasn't normal, was it? The only time she'd received a letter like this, it had been headed, "re: Arnold Butterworth, Deceased," and had talked about "your late uncle." There was none of that here. Just talk about confidentiality and not telling anyone.

Over her fourth Tio Pepe, Madge thought about all this, considered briefly ringing Benjamin Twohig to cancel the visit, and then decided against that. She smelled something, something not quite on the up-and-up about this, and she was by way of being an expert.

So, on Thursday the 12th, she gave Grace a couple of extra drops in the morning and some more in the afternoon, because Grace was by this time far from being able to keep track, and by the time 7 P.M. came round, the house was silent as the grave and she was ready for him. She had picked out a nice burgundy satin dress that both she and Grace looked very good in. She had laid out the sherry and the glasses on the table by the window, because this sounded like a meeting that could well run on and she had become accustomed to taking a little sherry before dinner. Before almost everything, in fact. She hoped Mr. Twohig liked Tio Pepe.

When he arrived, signalled by a 750cc roar up the drive, Mr. Twohig was quite a revelation. She hadn't quite known what to expect, but she had a blurry idea of a tall, cadaverous, elderly man in a black three-piece suit with a wing collar and pince-nez who would address her as "My dear Mrs. Westmacott." That idea was already beginning to fade even before she opened the door. Wing collars did not go with Yamahas.

In the flesh, Benjamin Twohig turned out to be a tall, ginger-

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haired, raw-boned youth of about twenty-five with enormous hands and ears and a very prominent Adam's apple. Taking off his motorcycle leathers, he revealed a suit that looked a bit shiny and short in the arms and was definitely off-the-peg, and he didn't really address her as anything. He looked round the sitting room when she showed him in, and said, "Nice house you got here. Bit remote, but nice."

"Thank you," said Madge. "I like it." Which was true. Especially the remote bit.

Benjamin Twohig sat down on the one sofa, and placed his crash helmet and gauntlets beside him on the floor. Madge had planned to sit on the other sofa, so that they faced each other across the long, carved Chinese coffee table. She had arranged it like this because he might need somewhere to lay out his papers. But Mr. Twohig didn't seem to have any papers. She also noticed that he was wearing white socks with his business suit. Without knowing why, she had always felt a kind of pity for men who wore white socks with a dark suit.

Before she sat down, Madge said, "I can offer you some sherry, if you like. If it isn't too early."

"Never too early for a drop of sherry," said Benjamin, rubbing his large hands together. So Madge went and poured two glasses and brought them to the table. They toasted each other silently and sipped, although Mr. Twohig gulped rather more than was conventional. His Adam's apple rose and plunged.

Madge said, "I'm afraid I'm not very used to this sort of thing, Mr. Twohig. I don't really know what it's all about, to be quite honest."

He nodded. His eyes were very blue, Madge noticed.

"Quite right," he said. "No reason why you should."

"In your letter you spoke about a deceased relative. I must admit, I was a little puzzled. Who is this relative?"

She was thinking: Perhaps Fulbright. He didn't look like a man with untold riches, but there *were* such things as eccentric millionaires. You read about it. Yes, that was probably it.

"Well," Benjamin said, "as to the identity of the defunct, I'm not in a position to tell you. Not as yet."

"Why ever not?" Madge said.

"It's just the way these things work," he said, finishing off the last of his Tio Pepe and then, to her astonishment, rising and going to the table by the window and helping himself to another. Madge was aghast. This was not the sort of behaviour she had expected. She had been right, there was something very definitely not right about Benjamin Twohig.

He came back and sat down again.

She said, in her firmest tone, "Now, Mr. Twohig, I have never heard of Sniving, Preacle, and Biles, but I take them to be a firm of integrity—"

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He interrupted her. "Sniving's?" he said. "Oh, I don't work for them."

"But," she waved the letter at him, "what about this?"

"That was to get your attention," he said, smiling. He had a large gap between the two central front teeth, she noticed. "There's nothing like a nice juicy letterhead to make people sit up and take notice. No, we do some work for them from time to time. I'm in and out of their place quite a bit, so sometimes I snaffle a bit of their paper. That's all."

He reached out and took the letter from her. He folded it and tucked it into his pocket. Madge was confused.

"We? Who's *we?*" she asked.

"The firm I work for."

"And what business might *they* be in, pray?" she said tartly, becoming more and more irritated by the minute.

"Confidential Enquiries," he said.

"What sort of confidential enquiries?"

"The sort that other people won't do," he said. "Or can't do. Quite specialised, you see."

"I really do not know what you're talking about."

He nodded. "All right," he said. "Give you an example. Let's suppose some old geezer dies, and in his will, made donkey's years before, he leaves all his great fortune to his brothers and sisters and their heirs and assigns—that's legal jargon," he added. "Trouble is, when he dies, all his brothers and sisters are already dead, and their children, if they had any, are dead. And it was a big family with lots of to-ings and fro-ings, people moving, emigrating, dying in far-flung places, all that. It's a right old mishmash sometimes, you wouldn't believe. So the lawyers administering the estate have got a bit of a job on, trying to track down the rightful heirs. If there are any. And that's where we come in."

"Your firm tracks down these heirs. And then you go and find them and tell them the good news."

"Ah." He raised a bony finger. "Not just like that. See, mostly the heir doesn't realise that they *are* an heir. We're the only ones that know who was the defunct and who and where the lawyers are who have the great fortune waiting."

She was beginning to see.

"So you only tell them for a price, is that it?"

"For a percentage."

"But that's absolutely outrageous!"

"Only a little bit. And there's a lot of firms doing it, believe you me." He was grinning now, letting her in on something.

"And people accept this?"

"Dead right, they do. Sign the contract straight off, most of them. Some of them think about it for a bit, but not for very long."

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"But couldn't they simply go off and find out for themselves?"

"Ah, no. See, these things are complicated. Even for experts, it takes months sometimes to track people down. You've got to be a cross between a private detective and a genealogist. No, they have to accept it, because quite frankly they haven't a hope in hell of finding out who's left them money. Usually it's such a remote relative that they don't even know they had a great-great-uncle William." He grinned again. "And no, it wasn't your great-great-uncle William, if that's what you're thinking."

"And what happens if they don't accept this, this—deal of yours?"

"Well, if no one claims the estate, eventually the government gets it. And that's such a waste, don't you think?"

"So," Madge said slowly, "you have information about a legacy to which I am entitled."

"A substantial legacy."

"How substantial is substantial?"

"Very. In the low seven figures."

She had no idea what this meant. She actually had to work out the zeros.

"You mean millions." She suddenly had a tight feeling in her chest.

"Yes, but not very many."

"But to have this information, I have to agree to pay a certain percentage to your firm."

He nodded.

"And what sort of percentage?"

"Half and half."

"Fifty percent?"

"That's it."

"But that is totally criminal."

"Is it? What'd you rather have, Mrs. Westmacott, a hundred percent of nothing or fifty percent of a fortune in the low millions?"

She didn't answer, because the answer was obvious and anyway she was thinking furiously. This was absolutely foolproof. These were people who had never met Grace and whose only interest in her was to give her some money. A lot of money. And there was the account in Buckshot just aching to have a cheque paid into it. There'd be some sort of formalities about proof of identity, of course, but that was just a question of a birth certificate and a passport. And if the doctor was now greeting her as Mrs. Westmacott, well . . . She realised that Benjamin Twohig was speaking again.

"I'm sorry, what were you saying?"

"I was saying, Mrs. Westmacott, that there's another complication. You see, you're not the only heir. You are a co-heir. So, after my firm had got their fifty percent, you'd eventually have to split it in half again."

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She thought for a moment, and then smiled. "Well, if it is, as you say, in the millions" (she was having trouble with that word), "that would still leave me with a substantial sum."

"Yes, but you'd end up with a quarter of the inheritance when you could end up with a lot more."

"Could?"

"Yes. I've been thinking, Mrs. Westmacott, that there might be a third way."

"A third way of what? I don't understand."

He was leaning forward now, with his large hands squeezed between his knees, his too-short sleeves riding up his forearms.

"Fifty percent is a lot. I've always thought that. It's too much. So, I've thought up a third way."

Madge looked at his anxious, rigid posture and thought, here it comes. This is it. This is why he's really here.

"And this third way is something to do with you, I suppose."

He grinned again, but this time it was a painful rictus. He ran a hand through that red hair.

"I got plans, I have. I don't want to be running about doing leg-work for these sort of people all my life. I've got plans. I want to make something of myself. I'm ambitious, I am. All I need is a leg-up, that's all, just a leg-up. Give me a start."

Ah.

"So what you're suggesting is that we have a private—arrangement—between us. Cut out your firm. Is that it?"

"They're real bastards, you don't know the half of it. They coin it in, milking people like you; they don't deserve it."

"So how much would this *third way* of yours involve?"

"I'm not greedy. Twenty-five percent. That's fair, isn't it? Half of what you'd be giving them."

"So you want me to sign a contract with you?"

"No, I don't want anything on paper. What we'd do is open a joint account kind of thing. And then, in the end—and it won't take long—when it's all sorted out, I take my share and leave you in peace."

"And if I don't agree, you walk out of here without telling me who my rich relation is, and how to get in touch with the lawyers, is that it? So, if I *do* agree, what about your firm? Is that why you don't want anything on paper?"

"They'd suspect something, they'd have to suspect something, but they couldn't do anything. I've thought about it a lot. I'd have to drop out of sight, disappear, because they're a nasty lot. They'd send people after me. And I won't bother telling you what they'd do if they found me. So obviously, I'd have to hide out somewhere. Here would do." He looked around.

"Here?"

"Upstairs. I wouldn't be any bother. You got lots of room. It

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wouldn't be for long. And anyway, we'd already be partners in a manner of speaking."

She felt laughter welling up in her. It was the sheer silliness of his rickety plan. I mean, really, it was ludicrous in its pure cheek. She could see a dozen holes in it, a dozen ways in which she could, if she wanted to, leave him standing there with nothing.

"But what about the other heir?"

"That's their hard luck. They won't miss what they've never had."

She thought about it in silence, looking at him carefully. Surely he didn't seriously imagine that she was going to accept. It was far too complicated, given the circumstances, and the thought of him living upstairs, next door to Grace Westmacott, was just too bizarre for words.

He was twisting his large hands together, still looking at her with that pitiful pleading gaze, his eyes fixed on her. Then she noticed that his eyes were never really still. They would rest on her for a certain moment and then slide away quickly to look at something else, then slide back again. She began to be certain that Mr. Benjamin Twohig was not to be trusted. Him and his Third Way. The fact that he was cheating his employers told you that he was dishonest. And imagine being tied up to a man like this, with enormous hands and slithery eyes and that Adam's apple, with a fortune in a joint account. Why, anything could happen. She could have an accident, it was always happening. And then he'd have it all.

No. It wasn't on. She was large and anxious, but she wasn't stupid.

And she knew what she was going to do.

"I'm afraid the answer is no, Mr. Twohig."

He jumped as though someone had passed a thousand volts through his body.

"Don't say that. Please, Mrs. Westmacott, please give it some thought."

"I have. And the answer is no. If you want to walk out of here without telling me any more, then so be it. But I'm afraid that this idiotic idea of yours simply won't do."

It was quite simple, she had decided. He hadn't thought it through properly. There was a Fourth Way. She would go to see Mr. Sniving. Or Mr. Preacle. Or even Mr. Biles. She would engage them as her solicitors. She would tell them the story, and after she had described Mr. Benjamin Twohig, they would certainly be able to identify his firm for her, and from then on, they could conduct the affair for her. That was the thing to do. She would take the Fourth Way.

He must have seen something of this playing on her face. His face twisted in a grimace of desperation.

He said, "Don't forget the other heir, Mrs. Westmacott. If you're thinking of going round me, you'd only get half of half of the estate. Twenty-five percent. My way, you get seventy-five percent.

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And that's a lot of money. You just can't imagine what it would mean. You just can't. Please, please reconsider. I urge you."

Urge. What a funny word to come out of that curious face.

The thing was, he was banking on her being greedy. But she wasn't. She was, all right, a little bit dishonest like most people, but not really grasping. After all, a sum in the low millions divided by half and then divided again by half would still leave what would be, for her, a gigantic figure. Enough to buy a nice house somewhere no one would ever find her, in Spain, for example, she'd always liked Spain, *and* to provide a nice income for the rest of her life. Yes, the Fourth Way was definitely the way to go.

She said, "I'm afraid I can't offer you any satisfaction. The answer is still no. I can offer you another glass of sherry, if you like, Mr. Twohig. In fact, I'll have one myself."

She picked up their glasses, then rose and went to the table by the window. He simply went on sitting there, with his great hands all twisting together.

She felt that laughter bubbling up once more. *No, I mean, how lucky can you get, Madge?* She really regretted not having someone she could tell about all this. Because they'd never believe it. Perhaps she'd whisper it to Grace one night after her medicine.

You answer a small ad quite by chance, you find yourself in a sweet little situation with lots of side benefits, and now, with the tiniest bit of organisation, you're looking at a fortune. Out of all the women in the world you could have chosen, what a wonderful piece of luck to have stumbled on Grace Westmacott. *Madge, you lucky girl,* she thought.

Behind her, Benjamin Twohig said, "You really would have been better off saying yes to my offer, you know, Mrs. Westmacott. Much better off. And now look what you've done." His voice had a whine of resentment in it.

She said, pouring the sherry, "But you see, Mr. Twohig, I really don't need *all* the money. It doesn't worry me about the other heir, you know. I don't mind sharing."

She was still thinking: *You lucky, lucky girl,* as she picked up the glasses and turned, but she didn't have far to go.

"I *tried,* Mrs. Westmacott, you have to admit I gave you every chance. I did my best," Benjamin Twohig was saying in a voice that was still curiously resentful. "I'm sorry about this, but your cousin Fulbright is ever so greedy and he really *does* mind sharing."

He had put those black gauntlets back on, he was walking towards her, and he had already started a horribly efficient backswing with that ghastly brass pedestal ashtray.

She had time to think, with total clarity and an odd lack of interest: *No, how silly of me. Of course,* this *is the Fourth Way.* And: *How surprised Grace will b—* ●

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SLOW-MOTION TORNADO

by Kimberly Colley

It's a big bar, but not big enough.

I've been working here at Rider's since the early 'seventies, probably the longest run of any bartender in Nebraska. Rider's Roadhouse squats on the edge of the prairie, about five miles past the factories that form a loose wagon circle around Dulles, the closest thing to a metropolis in this section of the state. It's a sprawling wooden building, with just enough roof to keep the rain off and hold up the neon sign that calls to bikers from both directions. If it's ever been repainted since I've been here, I don't remember it. The clapboards are just as gray as my beard, and a whole lot scraggier.

Kimberly Colley practiced law for ten years in southeastern Kentucky, and before that, worked as a reporter. She has taken what she hopes is a permanent retirement from the law to focus on her writing. She has never lived in a plains state such as that she writes of here. She "made it all up," and says, "for me, that is one of the chief delights of fiction, and why I'll never write about a lawyer."

Rider's started out as a blind pig in the 'twenties, back before all the factories moved in and made life so much better for us. When Prohibition ended, the bar managed to squeak by a few more years before the owner went bankrupt, after which the building stood empty for a long while. This is just what I'm told.

The current owner bought the place in 'seventy-two, made just enough repairs to bring it up to code, and opened it as a biker's bar. By that time, we were on the route that a lot of 'em took when they made their annual trek to the Black Hills. Word of mouth being what it is among bikers, the business built up pretty quick. We've had our share of bar fights through the years, but nothing we couldn't handle. With the exception of the toilets, the office, and the storage room, it's all open inside, like a dark and dirty Wal-

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Mart. The boss buys the cheapest tables he can find, particleboard crap that won't do too much damage if someone's head gets smashed against it, which happens just about as often as you'd expect. Or at least, it used to.

Dulles isn't too far from Omaha, you see, and while it's still mostly rural, we've seen the subdivisions edging towards us across the prairie like a slow-motion tornado. Out on Route 80, our old, dirty pickups are sharing more space with the shiny SUVs, and soon those pickups will be hauled off to Ed's junkyard, and only the SUVs will be left. A newer and better species roaming the plains.

People get funny ideas. After thirty years working behind a bar, you'd think I'd be used to it by now, but something always manages to come along and surprise me. The funny idea I'm talking about was, some Yuppie comes to the bar one night with a whole bunch of his friends. Yeah, this bar.

It was around eight o'clock. I guess this guy had just finished his supper at home, or maybe he'd been working late and wanted a beer. It was late November, just before Thanksgiving, dark outside, although the moon's reflection off the inch of snow on the hard ground cast enough light you could see out to Ahlvers' farm two miles across the open field.

He pulls open the door and walks in like he owns the place, that cock-of-the-walk stride that guys put on when they want to show everyone they're not really afraid. He's tall, with shiny—I mean, it glowed—brown hair, with his bright white collar sticking out over his navy-blue crewneck. His buddies sort of crowd in behind him, and together they shuffle over to the bar.

They had two drinks, and they left. No one got hurt, which pretty much amazed me. The bikers stared at 'em hard, made a few jokes about what the Yuppie wives were doing while their husbands were out drinking, and how the bikers would like to help them do it, but that was about all. The Yuppies, when they decided to leave, left quickly. The leader had lost his swagger; no Dutch courage for him. But they didn't trip over themselves, and they didn't make eye contact, and everyone got home safely that night. And then that weekend, more came back.

That was a year ago. In February's *Omaha Magazine,* Rider's was voted "Hippest Bar," and soon, on the weekend, more than half the parking lot came to be taken up by SUVs, Mercs, BMWs, and, of all things, Volvo station wagons. Inside, the bar was still open, one big, ugly room, but one half was taken up by men and women in business suits, their top buttons undone. They left the other half of the room to our bikers. They segregated themselves, like blacks and whites on a Sunday morning, the Yuppies on the right, bikers on the left. The barstools on this invisible divide were

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always empty, a no-man's land.

I suppose it was inevitable, given the time of year.

Here in Nebraska, we don't trust the spring. We see the sun in a bright blue sky, and our lips thin and our eyebrows pinch together. We see green buds on the spindly gray branches, and we shake our heads at the cruel joke nature is playing on us. Every warm day is a slap in the face, because we know another cold snap is on its way. And then one day, the cold snap doesn't show, and Nebraska exhales. When it does, people uncoil. All the sap that's been percolating inside them all winter long bubbles up and goes any damn where it pleases.

So I can't say I was too surprised when Tina Olsen—I learned her name later—had a fight with her husband on the right side of Rider's that Friday night.

They fought like nice, upper-middle-class people. Lots of low tones, hers going down to a shrill whisper when she got really mad, her husband's voice getting deeper and gruffer. Her knife-crease jawline whipped around as she spoke, emphasizing her words, and he interrupted her. I was refilling Eldon's beer down at the other end of the bar, but watching those two out of the corner of my eye. Her face was red. Her husband was jabbing his finger at her, his shoulders hunched towards her, his neck stiff, and then his finger made contact with her chest. She rocked back, and one hand flew to the tender spot on her breast where he'd poked her. She wanted to hit him, you could see it in her eyes, but you could also see the fear. She grabbed her purse and went to the ladies'.

When she came out ten minutes later, her husband was hunched over a fresh beer I'd just pulled him. He didn't see her, but she saw him. She stood there at the entrance to the bathrooms, watching him, her purse clutched to her chest, pushing her pearl necklace into a jumble around her pink, flowered sweater. She'd been crying. The fluorescent over the pay phone sparkled off her red, shiny nose. I looked at her then, and I knew what she was going to do, maybe even before she did.

She slung her little scarlet purse over her shoulder and began walking. She held her head straight and high, didn't even turn to look as she walked past her husband. Brad, I found out his name was. As she rounded the corner of the bar, one hand lifted a silky strand of her honey-brown hair and pushed it behind her ear, and she still didn't look.

I felt something fluttering in my stomach as she neared the divide. She seemed to feel it, too, and her step slowed for a millisecond; her foot, you could see it hover there above the scarred floorboards, and then it came down on the other side. She was across the divide.

The Yuppies paid no attention to her. They were busy with their

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cell phones and catalogs, but you could feel life, breath, and thought halt on the left side of the room, just for a moment, the way Tina's foot had halted in midair before crossing the divide. One woman stood up, her hand placed possessively on the shoulder of her boyfriend; then another woman, at another table. They were ready for her. Tina didn't notice them. She went up to the bar, to an empty stool between Tinker and Raz, turned her skinny little ass sideways, and slid onto the seat. I was already there, waiting for her.

The bar was suddenly a network of interconnected cells, interconnected atoms, and they all led back to me. Every light was unbearably bright, for I could see the bright red nails that flicked nervously at a scratch on a table, the piece of paper crumpled in a dusty corner, an old bloodstain on the chrome of the jukebox. The conversations were a meaningless hum. I knew the thoughts behind them, the lies, the desires, the boredom, the pain. And I knew, without turning, that Brad was staring across the horseshoe bar at his wife.

"I'd like a Bud Light, please." She had a tiny voice when she wasn't angry. It was sweet, like the bells on Christmas wreaths.

Tinker chuckled in that way he has of making you feel like a freight train's coming. "I'm sorry, ma'am," he said to her, "but Jack here don't serve Bud Light on this side of the bar. 'f he did, this whole place would just up and float away." He flitted his beefy arm in the air over her head, and she ducked.

Tinker's a big old boy from Kentucky. He has the build of a caveman, and there's always at least some evidence of his last meal stuck in his strawberry-blond beard, but he's a "good feller." That's about as high as you can get in Tinker's estimation, is a good feller. He never starts fights, always enters them unwillingly, and knows how to finish them quickly. I never saw him raise his hand to a woman, and he's never run out on his bill. That's about as high as you can get in my estimation.

Tina blinked at me, as if unsure whether to play along with the joke or not. "What do you serve?"

Tinker answered for me, saying she could have either a PBR or a Schlitz. "But if you want a boilermaker, Jack'll let you have a Miller Draft with it."

She looked at Tinker's bright blue eyes, almost hidden by his chubby cheeks. She licked her lips and then turned to me. My hand clenched automatically.

"I'll have a boilermaker."

"What kind of whiskey?" My voice felt like it came from somebody else.

"Wild Turkey."

This brought a hoot from Raz, and he slapped the bar and asked for the same.

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I turned to pour the shots and caught sight of Brad's face through the skyline of liquor bottles. He was staring at his wife across the room, his chin down, eyes up. The light glinted off his short, neat blond hair. He sat still as a headstone.

I set the shot glasses in front of Tina and Raz and pulled their beers. Raz, a true gentleman, waited for Tina. I watched the foam trickle over the side of Tina's mug, feeling the heat from Brad's steel-colored eyes boring through the skin on my back.

Raz curled his hand around his shot glass and looked at Tina. "On a count of three. Ready? One, two . . ."

Two elbows went up, two heads went back, two empty glasses were slammed down on the bar. Tina grimaced, her eyes squinched shut, and I wondered if she was going to be able to hold on to it, but at last her eyes opened. Raz laughed and Tinker slapped her on the back.

"Chase that puppy," Raz shouted, and lifted his beer. Tina followed, slowly, but when she set her mug down, it was half empty.

"Where'd a little thing like you learn to drink like that, darlin'?" Raz put his arm around Tina, and I could smell the acrid scent of two-day-old perspiration from where I was standing. Tina blinked, but she smiled up at him, then blinked again as if seeing him for the first time. He was a sight to behold, Raz. Long, stringy black hair, a goatee going towards salt-and-pepper, but the thing that pulled him out of lineups again and again was his eyes. In the light of that bar, you couldn't tell where the pupil ended and the iris began. It was like looking into a black hole. Someone asked him about his eyes once, and he said his family was Armenian, as if that explained it. People who spend time around Raz know to look over his left shoulder when speaking to him. You never look into that abyss twice.

"In college," Tina said, like she had majored in drinking.

Raz put his head down close to hers and she didn't pull away. "I bet you was a sorority girl, wasn't you?"

He was smiling, and she was looking him straight in the eyes, a rabbit in the thrall of the cobra. "Tri-Delt."

"Is that your name? Delt?" He smiled, but he looked angry, afraid of appearing stupid, but knowing he couldn't help it.

"No." She shook her head in confusion and closed her eyes, and I thought the spell would be broken then, that she wouldn't look back, but when she opened them again, she did. She stared straight into his eyes. "Delta Delta Delta. That was my sorority."

The wooden stool leg scraped across the floorboards as Tinker turned towards her. When he cleared his throat, too, I knew what he was trying to do. "I always wondered," he said, "what do sorority girls do? I mean, what's the point of being in a sorority?"

She glanced over her shoulder when she answered, but she

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didn't turn her body away from Raz. "It's a social club. You make friends. I guess it's sort of like being a biker."

This brought a shout of laughter from Raz, and though I didn't turn around, I swear I could feel all the muscles in Brad's body tense. I had Denise working that side of the bar. She wouldn't know what to do, she hadn't been tending bar long enough. I wanted to go over there myself and try and handle him, but I didn't dare leave Tina alone. I was as snared as she was.

"Are you calling us a sorority?"

Raz pulled a pack of Camels out of his inside vest pocket and shook one out before holding the pack out to her. She took one and then so did he. He lit up, then slid the Bic over to her. She had to hold on to it with both hands, her thumb struggling with the serrated metal rollers before finally getting the flame to catch. The tiny yellow light illumined her face in a sickly glow, and then it was gone.

She coughed, her body curving with the effort to take in the smoke, but she recovered quickly, blinking away the moisture from her eyes and rubbing the back of her thumb under her nose. "No, I'm calling you a fraternity." She managed a smile. "Boys are in fraternities, girls are in sororities."

And then Raz leaned back in towards her, until his forehead was touching hers. "I ain't no boy, lady." His arm moved, and I knew his hand had slid to her knee. "Are you still a little girl, or are you a woman?"

She arched her back. Sweet Jesus, she arched her back. I did a quick inventory—the shotgun was strapped under the bar down by the cash register, six feet away, the S&W .45 underneath the bar towels down near my feet.

"I think I'm a woman. But what do you think?"

Raz's voice was a growl. "I think you're a little girl. I don't think that boy of yours over there ever once made you squeal. You ever squealed for him?"

Tinker's stool scraped again, sharper this time, as he got up and walked around to Raz, cupping his hand around Raz's tattooed bicep. "Come on, man, let's go."

Raz shook him off, his gaze never leaving Tina. "You got someplace to go, go. I got business here."

"You got no business here, man," Tinker said, and that got Raz's attention. He turned away from Tina slowly, the tendons in his neck taut, but his shoulders loosened, their muscles oiling up in instinctive preparation.

"I got every business here. *We* got business here. This is our bar."

"That's right, Raz. We belong here. She doesn't."

"What do I have to do to get initiated into this fraternity?"

Both men looked back at Tina, sitting there with one arm on the bar, puffing on that Camel like she was Lana Turner in a wiseguy

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dive. All the color drained from Tinker's face, and his fists clenched and opened, clenched and opened. Raz ran his hand up her thigh until it was cupping her ass.

"All you gotta do is go for a ride. My bike is right outside. Wanna ride?"

All four of us were frozen in a tableau that would've been funny if it wasn't so terrifying, and then it shattered. Tinker pulled at Raz's left shoulder. Raz's right arm cocked back, and then his fist snapped into Tinker's face, slamming into his left cheek instead of his nose as Tinker turned away and down. Tinker came back up leading with his right, catching Raz on the jaw. I heard the crunch of teeth grinding together, breaking, and I crouched, reaching under the towels for the .45, and when I came up, there were three men there, three men in a clumsy group hug. And then Raz fell away.

He hit the floor on his left side, and that's why I didn't see it. I heard it, though, that thick, dull squish of sharp metal in soft flesh that I've heard a few times in my life. I knew what I'd see before I saw it. A dark pool was forming beneath Raz's ribs. He rolled onto his back, and I saw the shaft of a pocketknife sticking out from the T-shirt. He was still breathing, but it was a nasty, gurgling sound, and a second later, I saw a bubble of blood come popping out of his mouth.

Denise was already on the phone to 911. I could hear her low, frantic voice murmuring into the portable just behind me. I was just standing there, the automatic loose in my limp hand, stunned by the knowledge that I was watching my first killing in ten years. I tell myself that I was in shock, and that's why I didn't react.

But I saw it all. I saw Tinker take a step towards Brad, saw him pull the kid into a one-arm embrace, the boy's back to his chest, saw his other arm reach up, the hand grab the jaw, saw it pull once, sharp, final. And I heard the crack.

It's funny. I don't remember the screaming, though Denise says there was a lot of it. Mostly from Tina, she says. But I didn't hear that, just the snapping of Brad's neck, cannon-loud and reverberating in the canyon of my skull.

The police closed us down for a while, and when we opened back up, the Yuppies didn't return. A few bikers straggled in, but not enough to stay in the black. For a few months there, I thought we were going to have to shut our doors, but the owner was an old biker himself. He said they'd come back eventually, and they did, but business hasn't been the same since Raz died. Tinker's doing a life stretch in Leavenworth, and the owner's getting old. He hasn't got any kids, at least none that he knows of, so when he goes, I reckon this place'll go too.

I hear Starbucks is looking for a location in these parts. ●

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Art by Allen Davis

PAUL REVERE'S BELL

by Edward D. Hoch

It was the spring of 1794, a time when British seizures of American ships in the Caribbean was becoming a major problem. Alexander Swift had arrived in Philadelphia to report to President Washington on continued progress with the Patowmack Canal, but he found that Washington had other things on his mind.

"It is always good to see you, Alexander," he said, offering a firm handshake. "I hope your wife and son are well."

"Very well, sir. And this city seems back to normal following the yellow-fever scourge."

Washington nodded. "It's difficult to remember how bad it was just six months ago. Now our attention is given over to foreign matters. The British are disrupting our trade with the West Indies. Jefferson wanted us to be firm with them, to retaliate in kind, but since he resigned as Secretary of State our policy has floundered a bit. My new Secretary, Edmund Randolph, is no Jefferson. Nonetheless, I am resisting retaliation and will send Chief Justice John Jay to London in hope of averting war. Our country is too

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young to risk another clash with the British."

"Is there anything I can do?" Alexander asked, more out of habit than anything else.

President Washington eyed him for a moment, perhaps remembering all his earlier assignments, in the days of Benedict Arnold. "There is one thing," he said slowly. "You can go to Boston and see about Paul Revere's bell."

Boston in 1794 was the third-largest city in the United States, with a population approaching 19,000. Built on a somewhat isolated peninsula connected to the rest of the state by a narrow strip of land called Boston Neck, it was the center of the universe for the new nation's first immigrants. Though he was approaching his sixtieth birthday, Paul Revere remained the acknowledged leader of the city's artisans, with his own foundry on Lime Street near the tip of North Boston and a silversmith shop on Anne Street.

Ellery Queen considered the mystery involving real historical figures the hardest type to write. "It is really a monumental task—so herculean a labor that your editors have never had the temerity to attempt it. . . .The historical figure has to be convincing as well as authentic, and the scene, speech, and manners have to be projected with equal authenticity." Mr. Hoch frequently brings real figures into his Alexander Swift stories, and does a fine job integrating them with fictional characters. ¶

He received Alexander Swift on a cool May morning in his little office at the foundry, a place that brought back memories for Swift of the one north of West Point where the fabled Hudson Chain had been forged during the war years. "Sometimes I think Boston is a city of rope," he told Swift after being complimented on the foundry. "From the earliest days there have been cordage factories here for the shipyards. Ropewalks, they call them. I have always dealt in sturdier stuff."

Paul Revere was a stout, dignified man with hair that was turning white and the beginning of a jowled appearance to his face. Swift wanted to ask him if he still rode horseback a great deal, but the remark might have seemed flippant. Instead he said, "President Washington tells me you have recently begun casting bells."

"So I have, Mr. Swift. Sit down and let us take tea together. I cannot believe the President sent you to Boston to talk about my bells. I should never have informed him of my misgivings."

An employee named Rossiter brought them a pot of tea and two cups, and Swift remarked, "You seem to have a good relationship with your workers."

"I pay them well and treat them like human beings. I know I

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could hire men for less, but they wouldn't be loyal like my people. John Rossiter has been with me for twenty years."

"Tell me about these bells."

"It came about in an interesting manner," Revere said, warming to the subject. "Two years ago, the bell on our church—the bell that hung on the famous Old North Church until British troops took the building down for firewood—cracked and could not be rung. There was talk of shipping it to England to be recast, but none of the church leaders wanted to do that. At our meeting, mellowed by some bottles of fine Madeira, I not only agreed to be one of thirty-five contributors to the cost of restoring the bell but also offered to recast it."

"Had you ever recast a bell before?" Swift asked, sipping his tea and thinking wistfully of that fine Madeira.

"Never," Paul Revere admitted. "In fact, very few bells have been cast in America. The most famous, of course, is the Liberty Bell. But I knew there was a bell foundry in Abington and I sought help from them. I must admit that that first bell was harsh and shrill, but I am getting better at it. I am even running small advertisements in area newspapers. My goal now is to craft a bell for every steeple in New England."

"A noble but difficult task. The President tells me you have already run into unexpected problems."

Revere sighed. "Only in Washington's mind. Some of these bells weigh up to eight hundred pounds, and as each one is finished now I cart it from the foundry to my own backyard a few blocks away on Charter Street. In the presence of a committee of church deacons and donors, and a group of neighborhood children, I sound the bell for the first time with a hammer. Should the tone be unacceptable, I will buy back the old metal. I must tell you, Mr. Swift, what the bell sounds like is largely a matter of luck. Still, my customers are usually pleased."

"Then what is the problem?"

He took a sip of tea before responding. "My latest bell, and my largest thus far, is bound for Quebec. A delegation of Canadians will arrive tomorrow to hear it rung for the first time. Somehow the President is concerned their trip might be part of a British plot."

Swift chuckled at the idea but said, "Perhaps he fears our old nemesis Benedict Arnold may sneak back into the country as part of your Canadian group."

"In a nation this young, I suppose he must always be vigilant."

"Certainly Arnold and others have tried to persuade George the Third to launch an attack on us, and the recent harassment of our West Indies shipping trade is troublesome. But from all reports,

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the British Parliament is loath to undertake any formal action against us."

"What does President Washington want of you?"

"Only that I remain here until the bell is safely delivered to the Canadians and they depart. He didn't feel it proper to send the militia—"

"I'm glad of that! Armed guards might give churchmen the wrong impression."

"You are one of the true heroes of the revolution," Swift reminded him. "It is always possible that the British might wish to assassinate you."

Revere laughed at the idea. "I hardly think they'd consider me a threat at my age. If they came again, someone younger than me would have to spread the alarm. But come to my house Thursday, by all means! Another set of ears is invaluable in judging the tone of the bell. We plan to cart it over there around eleven in the morning, and to sound it for the first time at noon."

"I will be there on Thursday," Swift promised, "and accompany the bell on its brief journey." But he couldn't help wondering what had prompted the President to send him on this mission. Was it simply uneasiness with the Canadian delegation, or something else?

It was years since Alexander Swift had visited Boston, and he was encouraged by the way the city at last was beginning to shake off its postwar decline. Its trade with London and the West Indies had all but collapsed after the Revolution, and both the British and the French harassed the ships that did put to sea. There was talk in Philadelphia of forming a United States Navy to protect the ships, but in that spring of '94 it was only talk. Still, the ropewalks and foundries and fish markets were busy, and traffic in the port was gradually increasing.

Revere had arranged for Swift to stay with a neighbor, Mrs. Patrick, in her pleasant little house on Charter Street. She proved to be a formidable widow with graying hair and a keen sense of the world around her. "You can call me Betsy," she informed Swift when he arrived at her house. "Like the flag woman. It's a very patriotic name."

"It is indeed," he agreed. "You must feel a part of history, being a neighbor to Paul Revere."

"Well, I wasn't yet his neighbor when he and Dawes made their famous rides. In fact, he still owns the house on North Square, but he rented this one a few years back to be closer to his foundry. He's a proper sort and Rachel is a dear wife, ten years younger than Paul. They've had eight children, though only five survived their infancy. He had eight by his first wife, too, and it killed her."

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Somehow this was more than Swift needed to know. "He'll be ringing a new bell on Thursday."

Betsy Patrick sighed. "Paul is a good friend, but those darn bells really have started to annoy me. My dear husband, when he was alive, used to dread each new one. He would hear the cart trundling down Charter Street shortly before noon, and we both knew it was another bell on the way. The children know it, too. They flock around, as do the neighbors. These days he's turning out the bells so fast there's at least one a month."

"Did your husband fight in the war?"

"He was a Minuteman," she answered proudly. "He fought at Lexington and Concord."

"The militia was our savior in those early days. People like your husband and Paul Revere and the rest made this nation possible. Certainly you can put up with the single gong of a bell once a month."

"It's not a single gong, though. Sometimes the buyers want several strokes to be certain the bell is sound. When I hear them coming now I stay in my house and play the spinet to try to muffle the sound."

After dinner, Swift insisted Betsy Patrick play a few selections on her spinet. She was quite good, and he listened for nearly an hour before retiring early. He missed his wife and child, as he always did when traveling, but sleep came quickly to him.

Revere had arranged for dinner the following evening with his Canadian guests, and he sent a message inviting Swift to join them. The meal was at the Revere home, with his wife Rachel serving food for the six of them. She was a jovial, smart-looking woman with an oval facial contour that men seemed to admire. Swift thought her nose a bit long, and concluded that she was handsome rather than beautiful. Though some of their children still lived at home, she fed them separately before joining their guests at the table.

They were six in all, the Reveres and Swift, plus three delegates from the church in Quebec. One was a woman, Mrs. Southworth, a pale, attractive lady in her thirties who was introduced as the church's organist. Then there was Rollo Blake, a parishioner, and the Reverend Douglas Hayes, the church's rector. Revere introduced Alexander Swift as a personal representative of President Washington, which seemed to impress them immensely.

Swift was seated next to Mrs. Southworth, who wanted to hear all about the President. After a few minutes he managed to shift the conversation to church organs. "Was yours built in Canada?" he asked.

"No, no. The good organs all come from Europe. Ours was

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brought over on a brig from Germany. We thought it would never arrive. Now our church is almost complete. We lack only Mr. Revere's bell for our tower."

"How have you traveled to Boston?" he asked, curious as to the problem of transporting the bell back to Canada.

"It has been an arduous journey in Mr. Blake's wagon, now parked in Mr. Revere's yard. He was kind enough to send our horses to a stable down the street. Tomorrow the bell will be transferred to our wagon and we will carry it back with us, but it is not the most comfortable method of travel."

"We are almost three hundred miles north of here," Rollo Blake explained. "We stopped overnight at a Vermont inn, a charming place."

"You should come this way in autumn for the change of seasons. I'm told the colors of the foliage are less vivid in Canada."

"We're close enough to the Vermont border that it makes little difference. I often visit Boston, and on one of my previous trips I learned that Mr. Revere was now casting church bells. I communicated the news to Reverend Hayes and he was most enthusiastic."

"Indeed I was," the minister agreed. Hayes was a bit younger than Rollo Blake, probably still in his forties. He was quite slender, with a pale complexion.

"How do you happen to have business here?" Swift asked the older man. "Is trade increasing between our countries?"

"It is, and as a former resident of the Massachusetts Colony, I am always pleased to return here." He smiled slightly. "I confess I was one of the Loyalists who fled to Canada when your Revolution succeeded."

"We have put all that behind us," Revere told him. "We hope to be friends with our neighbors to the north, and with George the Third, too, for that matter."

"With the revolution in France, all monarchies are shaky these days. However, I believe the king will endure."

Mrs. Revere's dinner was a tasty mix of traditional Boston dishes, and her guests thoroughly enjoyed it. Following another hour of pleasant conversation, with cigars for the men, the Canadian visitors departed, promising to return before noon for delivery of the bell.

"They seem very nice," Rachel Revere commented. "Mr. Blake looks familiar."

"He said he travels here on occasion. You may have seen him in North Square," her husband suggested.

"And how are you getting on with our neighbor, Mrs. Patrick?" Rachel asked, directing her attention to Swift.

"She is a charming woman, very talkative. I thank you for arranging the accommodation." He took out his pocket watch.

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"Now I believe I must return there, before the poor woman shuts the door on me. I will see you both on the morrow."

Like many residences in the city, Paul Revere's Charter Street house sat flush with the sidewalk and had no front yard. Swift and the Canadians passed through a gate in the wall to reach a yard at the rear where Rachel maintained a small garden. The gate also provided entrance for the bell, which arrived on a wagon driven by Revere's assistant, John Rossiter. As soon as the neighborhood children saw its approach, they ran to meet it, crowding into the backyard to such an extent that Revere himself had to order them back.

Mrs. Southworth, Mr. Blake, and the Reverend Hayes were all caught up in the rush of children. The big bell, forged from a mixture of copper and tin, with some zinc and lead as well, remained on the wagon, hanging from a crossbeam. Its clapper had not yet been attached. Rossiter climbed onto the bed of the wagon and handed Revere a hammer with which the first blow would be struck. Around them there was silent anticipation.

"This is it," Revere announced. "The first ringing of a new church bell." All eyes were on him as he lifted the hammer above his head to bring it down. Then, suddenly, there was the sound of a gunshot and the ping of something hitting the bell. Swift's first thought was that one of the older children had fired at the bell, but then he saw Rollo Blake fall to the ground clutching his chest.

"He's been shot!" Rossiter yelled. "He's bleeding!"

Blake made an effort to lift himself from the ground, but it was too much for him. He dropped back and lay still. Reverend Hayes turned him over, to reveal even more blood. "Rollo! Rollo!" Then his face seemed to crumple. "May God have mercy! He's dead."

The children were hustled away, retreating to the street where they crowded around the gate fighting for the best view. But the uproar brought neighbors, including Mrs. Patrick, to the scene. "What happened?" she asked Swift. "It sounded like a shot."

"It was a shot. Someone killed Rollo Blake, one of the Canadians."

"But who would do that?"

"Some would-be patriot, I fear," Paul Revere told her. "The man was a British loyalist who had fled to Canada."

Boston law-enforcement officers were summoned to the scene. Though they wore no uniforms and carried no guns, they were the first such force in the new nation, predating the Revolution by several decades. Swift was unimpressed by the two men who arrived to take charge, and their main action was to search everyone in the crowd for a weapon. No one had seen anything, and no weapons were produced.

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"It could have been one of the older children," Mrs. Southworth suggested.

Swift knew that was a possibility. He went out to the street to speak with those who were still there, well aware that a guilty child might have fled when the law officers arrived. One boy, taller than the rest and probably around seventeen, seemed nervous. "What is your name, son?" Swift asked.

"Gerber, sir." The youth was already edging away.

Swift gripped his shoulder with a firm hand. "Do you know anything about this shooting?"

"No, sir."

"Did you see anyone with a flintlock pistol? Perhaps someone was trying to ring the bell with it and hit that man by accident."

"I don't know anything," he whined, trying to break free.

"Do you own a flintlock?"

"No, no!"

"Then why are you so nervous?"

"I knew him. I seen him around."

"The dead man? Rollo Blake?"

"I didn't know his name, but I seen him down the street at the Pig and Whistle a couple of times."

"When was this?" Swift wanted to know.

"Back last fall and winter."

"Was he with anyone?"

"Don't know. Le' me go!"

"Something must have made you notice him."

Revere's assistant, John Rossiter, had joined them on the sidewalk. "What's the trouble here?"

"This boy claims to have seen the victim in the neighborhood last year."

"Sure, didn't Mr. Revere tell you? That's how we got the job. Mr. Blake came down here occasionally on business and heard about our bell casting."

Now Swift remembered Rollo Blake mentioning his frequent Boston trips at dinner the previous night, but he was still surprised to learn the dead man had been a patron of the local pub. Perhaps he had made an enemy there.

"Do you ever go to the Pig and Whistle, John?"

"Been in the place a few times. Never saw him there, though."

Swift wished there was some way to convey the news of the killing to President Washington in Philadelphia, but a courier would take two days by horse. He couldn't help feeling that Washington's motive in sending him to Boston might have had something to do with Blake's presence in the city. But if that was the case, the President must have learned of the planned visit from Paul Revere.

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Swift released his grip on young Gerber's shoulder. Revere was the one he had to speak with.

Once the official investigation had wound down and Blake's body had been removed, Revere turned his attention to the bell. The fatal flintlock ball had passed through Blake's body, apparently from back to front, with the back wound being higher than the front. Then it had hit the bell near the bottom of the rim. Revere examined the tiny dent and proclaimed it almost invisible to the eye, which in truth it was. "A bit of buffing should remove it entirely," he assured Reverend Hayes and Mrs. Southworth.

"When will we hear it rung?" she asked.

"There is no time like the present." So saying, Revere picked up the hammer and swung it at the bell. It gave off a deep mellow tone that brought a smile to Mrs. Southworth's face.

"A fine sound, don't you think?" she asked Reverend Hayes.

"*Glorious! I only wish Rollo were here to experience this* moment."

Revere reached the hammer inside the bell and struck it about where the clapper would hit. The sound seemed to resonate even more. "That should bring your worshipers in," he said.

The minister smiled. "We'll take it," he said, shaking Revere's hand.

"But how will we get it back home without Mr. Blake to drive the wagon?" Mrs. Southworth wondered.

At Revere's side, John Rossiter cleared his throat. "If Mr. Revere allows it, I could drive that wagon up to Quebec for you. I know how to handle a good team of horses. I can trail my own mount behind the wagon and ride him back."

Reverend Hayes seemed to sigh with relief. "Mr. Revere, if you would allow it, this would be of great help to us. Managing a team of horses pulling a heavy load such a long distance might be more than I could handle."

Revere thought about it. "Today is Thursday. Best to stay overnight and get a good morning start. Three days up would be Monday, three days back would be Thursday."

"Or Wednesday night," his assistant replied. "A lone horse and rider will make better time than a heavily loaded wagon with three passengers."

"Very well," Revere agreed. "But be careful. I cannot afford to lose you."

His workmen transferred the bell to Blake's wagon, and arrangements were made to wrap his body in protective sailcloth for the journey home. It was agreed that the travelers would spend one more night in Boston before starting out. "Perhaps it is

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fitting that Rollo accompany Mr. Revere's bell to its new home," Mrs. Southworth commented.

When they were alone, Swift asked Revere if he had contacted Washington about selling the bell to the Quebec church. "I sent him a message, but he had no problem with it," Revere said.

Yet the whole thing bothered Swift. Later that night, back at Mrs. Patrick's, he asked her about Revere's yard. "That fence wouldn't keep anyone out if they wanted to get in. Are there ever any prowlers over there?"

"Once in a while. Just last night I saw a couple of people from my bedroom window, moving around in the dark. The moon wasn't bright enough to see who they were. Neighborhood kids, I suppose. I called out from the window and shooed them away."

"Was it always like that, or just since Mr. Revere rented the house?"

"My husband died in 'ninety. It was quieter in those days. Our neighbors were an elderly couple who went to bed at dusk every night. The place is livelier with Mr. Revere and his family and I don't resent that. He's a great national hero."

After supper, she played the spinet for a time, filling the house with the rousing sound of "Yankee Doodle." Swift applauded at the end. "I don't think I've ever heard that played on a spinet," he told her.

"It's one of my favorites." She closed the keyboard and stood up. "I'm going to bed now. I don't like to disturb the neighbors by playing after dark. I'll have breakfast for you in the morning."

"I regret being such a bother. I promise to be gone by tomorrow night."

"You're no bother at all. It's good having a man around the house for a few days."

After she'd gone up to her room, Swift sat by the lamplight for some time. Rollo Blake's murderer, seemingly invisible to their eyes, must have had a motive. He rejected the idea that a youngster might have fired a pistol at the bell and hit Blake by mistake. Blake was an occasional visitor to the city and might have made enemies. If that was the case, he should check out the Pig and Whistle, the local pub where he'd been seen.

The streets were not quite dark when he left Betsy Patrick's house, strolling along Charter Street toward the pub. He passed the fish market, and ahead he could see the glow of lamps in the pub window. There were a half-dozen customers at the bar. He ordered a beer, and when the bartender brought it he said, "I hear somebody shot Rollo Blake. Did you know him?"

He wiped up some of the spilled beer. "Not by name. They tell me he came here when he was in town."

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Swift glanced at the other customers. "Any of his friends here now?"

The bartender called down to the end. "Smitty, you knew that Blake chap, didn't you?"

A young man with long blond hair, who appeared to be in his early twenties, answered. "I had a beer with him last night. Who wants to know?"

Swift moved down the bar to his side. "I'm Alexander Swift. I was there when he was shot this noon."

"Don't know anything about that, just what people are saying."

"How about his wagon?"

Smitty shrugged and said nothing. He wasn't the talkative sort. Swift finished his beer in silence. He was about to leave when the youth spoke up. "Why'd you ask that?"

"What?"

"About the wagon."

"They're not able to get it back to Quebec without Blake. I understand one of Paul Revere's assistants will be driving it up."

"They looking to hire a driver? Plenty of young gents around here could use the money. Me, for one."

"I believe it's been taken care of, Smitty."

Swift left him at the bar and went out into the night street. A few people were on the sidewalk, but they ignored him. The city had once had a reputation for street fighting and even now as he hurried back to Betsy Patrick's house he could not help but imagine he was being followed.

All seemed quiet at the Patrick and Revere houses, but he could see that the gate to the Revere yard was ajar. He entered, using the moonlight to guide him to Blake's wagon. The heavy bell was in place for the return trip, and in the morning a team of fresh horses would be brought from the stable. Swift felt around the bell and the wagon itself, finally dropping to his knees to examine the underside of the wagon. Something was there, something—

The intruder was upon him before he heard a sound, wrestling him flat on the ground and striking his shoulder with some sort of club. They rolled over in the dirt, with Swift aware only that he was fighting a younger, stronger man who wanted to harm him. The attacker managed to straddle him and Swift turned his head as the club descended again, just missing him. He unseated the man and toppled him to the ground, following up on his momentary advantage to wrestle the club from him. The assailant scurried away in the dark, spiderlike, and Swift had only a quick glimpse of him in a sudden beam of moonlight as he got to his feet and ran.

He couldn't be sure, but it looked like Gerber, the tall lad who'd been at the scene of Blake's killing earlier.

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Swift took a deep breath and went back under the wagon, keeping the confiscated club handy for defense. There were four wooden barrels strapped to the underside, but without a light he could not identify what they were. Frustrated, he returned to the house and lit one of Betsy Patrick's candles. Checking the yard and street to make certain his would-be assailant had not come back, Swift ducked under the wagon once more and held the candle up to the barrels. He saw the words *Poudre à Canon* and froze. It was a full five seconds before he had the wits to blow out the candle flame.

Rachel Revere came to the door in response to his knocking. She carried an oil lamp and was obviously frightened to be awakened in the middle of the night. Swift apologized and told her he must speak to her husband at once.

"What is it, Rachel?" Revere called out, coming down the stairs in his nightshirt.

Swift quickly explained the reason for awakening them. "There are barrels of gunpowder attached to the bottom of Blake's wagon. They could blow up the entire house."

Revere's face was grim. "I'll get dressed immediately."

With an oil lamp on the ground a safe distance away, Revere examined the four barrels and carefully freed them from their bindings. Swift helped him carry them a safe distance from the house. "That should do it," he said with relief.

"We'll remove it in the morning. I thank you for your warning, Alexander."

"Someone jumped me while I was searching the wagon. I believe it was one of the youths who were here yesterday. Mrs. Patrick said she'd chased some away the previous night."

"The markings on these barrels are French," Revere observed. "They were smuggled in from Quebec."

"But why? Certainly there is no shortage of gunpowder here."

"I fear it was meant for a bomb. It is nearly two centuries since the Gunpowder Plot to blow up Parliament, but British loyalists may have been planning something similar here. Boston is our state's capital and the cradle of revolution."

"Do you think those Canadians planned this?"

"I doubt if the minister or Mrs. Southworth was involved. About Mr. Blake I cannot say. He was an admitted loyalist who fled to Canada when the Revolution began."

"We must question Reverend Hayes and Mrs. Southworth about this."

"Of course," Revere agreed.

"Meantime, I'll try to locate the youth who assaulted me."

At sunrise he walked down to the fish market, carrying the club

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he'd retrieved from his assailant. The previous day's catches were being sorted and priced while early shoppers began to drift in. One man holding a three-foot-long cod seemed familiar and Swift remembered him from the Pig and Whistle.

"Smitty, isn't it?"

The blond-haired youth recognized him at once. "Looking for that driver, are you?"

"No, looking for a kid named Gerber. Younger than you, tall, maybe seventeen or eighteen."

"I know who you mean. Hasty Gerber. Don't hire him to drive your wagon. He's a knacker."

"What's that?"

"He kills stray animals and sells their carcasses to rendering works. It's a loathsome occupation."

"Does he use a club like this?" Swift held up the weapon.

Smitty nodded. "Looks like one he carried."

"Where do I find him?"

"Down by the docks if he's not still asleep. Sometimes he helps unload boats at Hitchbourn Wharf."

Following directions, Swift walked south to Fish Street and then west for several blocks to the wharf. He suspected Gerber's height would make him easy to spot, and he was right. The youth was standing with some others as Swift approached. He saw him coming, saw the club dangling from his right hand, and took off down the pier. It was a dead end for him, but he didn't seem to realize it till Swift had him cornered.

"I just wanted to return your club," he told the youth. "You might need it to kill a stray dog or two."

Hasty Gerber looked frightened. "I wasn't trying to kill you last night."

"I know. You came there for the gunpowder. Now you're going to tell me who you're working for, or I'll do a little knacking myself."

Some of the others on the pier had gathered around, but no one came to Gerber's aid. "All right!" he pleaded, pushing out with his open palms. "Don't hit me!"

Swift gripped him by the shoulder as he had on their first meeting. "Did you kill Rollo Blake?"

"What? You're crazy! I never did it. I was just after those barrels of gunpowder."

"Come along. You're going to tell us all about that."

In the presence of Paul Revere and a law-enforcement officer, Hasty Gerber told how he and another youth had been hired by Rollo Blake to sneak into Revere's garden after dark and remove the four barrels from under the wagon. A neighbor had heard them the first time and frightened them off. After that, the other

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lad had wanted no part of it. Gerber had returned alone last night and encountered Swift. The law officer listened to it all and promised to pursue the investigation.

"It was all Blake's doing, of course," Swift remarked when he was alone with Revere. "He suggested the church purchase a bell from you so he'd have an excuse to cross the border with his wagon. The border guards had no reason to search it carefully with a minister and two parishioners on board."

"All right," Revere agreed, "but why did this Gerber youth try to steal the gunpowder last night, after he knew Blake was dead?"

"Just to have it for himself," Swift answered.

"Do you think he killed Blake for that purpose?"

"I don't know. When I grabbed him on the street just after the shooting he had no pistol with him."

But he wasn't satisfied. At ten o'clock, when Reverend Hayes and Mrs. Southworth arrived to begin their journey back to Quebec, he still wasn't satisfied. He stood in Revere's yard, near where Blake had fallen, and imagined where the killer might have stood. The sun had come out, bathing the city in the first real warmth of spring.

Betsy Patrick came out on her back porch and called to him. "I've made some lemonade if you'd like a glass."

"That would taste good about now." He went up the steps and she handed him a glass. He pulled up a chair to join her.

"I see John Rossiter has arrived," she said, filling his glass from her pitcher.

"He's volunteered to drive the wagon back to Quebec. Reverend Hayes was uncertain he could manage it with that heavy bell on board."

"Will you be leaving today as planned, Mr. Swift?"

Swift nodded. "I only came here at the behest of President Washington."

"He was concerned about Rollo Blake?"

"I believe so, yes. Now that Blake is dead and the bell is on its way to Canada, my work here is finished."

"What about Blake's killing?"

"That may have to go unsolved, at least by me. That is, unless you feel the need to confess."

Her eyes shot up, suddenly full of fear. "What do you mean?"

"You killed him, Betsy. You shot him from your bedroom window with your husband's musket."

"How could you know that?" she demanded. "Did you see me do it?"

"No, but the angle of the bullet, entering high on his back and exiting lower down at the front, indicated he was shot from above.

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This would explain why none of us saw a weapon. You'd told me your bedroom window overlooked Revere's yard when you yelled at the intruders two nights ago. You also told me you played the spinet to drown out the sound of the bells, but there was no spinet to be heard yesterday morning because you were at the upstairs window."

"Why would I shoot Rollo Blake?"

"You know the true motive better than I do. You told me that Revere's ringing of each new bell annoyed your husband, but Revere didn't cast his first bell until seventeen ninety-two. Your husband died in seventeen ninety. Who was this person annoyed by the ringing of the bells, someone you equated in your mind with your husband? I contend it was Rollo Blake, a frequent visitor to Boston and to the Pig and Whistle pub just down the street. His face was even familiar to Rachel Revere. Visiting your house was how he learned of Revere's bells and how he devised his plan for smuggling gunpowder into the city. He even told you about that, didn't he?"

She'd put down her glass of lemonade and was staring across the yard at the wagon as the horses were hitched up. "Sometimes, after he'd been drinking, he got crazy. He talked about blowing up our State House. I wrote President Washington an anonymous letter warning about it, but he did nothing."

He did something, Swift wanted to say. *He sent me.* Instead he said, "So you shot Rollo."

"There was no other way to stop him. When I saw them trying to retrieve something from that wagon, I knew he was going through with his plan. He was a bad man, Mr. Swift, in more ways than one."

"I suspected from the beginning that he was killed by a musket rather than a pistol, because the ball passed through the body with enough force to ring that bell. But no one standing near the victim could have hidden a musket under their clothing and fired it without being seen. I thought about that just now, and remembered the angle of the shot."

"What will you do about it?" she asked.

"I will report back to President Washington that the situation was dealt with by a patriot named Betsy. Thank you for the lemonade."

She smiled, perhaps with relief, as he got to his feet. "Tell me one thing, Mr. Swift. How did you know my husband had a musket?"

"Madam, you told me yourself he was a Minuteman, and I'm sure he was a brave one." ●

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Something Fishy in Pompeii

by Steven Saylor

"Taste it," said Lucius Claudius. "Go on—taste it!"

I wrinkled my nose. Strange as it may sound, I was not particularly fond of garum. Never mind that ninety-nine of a hundred Romans adore it, and add it to ninety-nine of a hundred dishes, spooning it over everything from sausages to egg custard, from asparagus to honey cakes. "Garum goes with everything," goes the popular saying.

We sat in the garden of Lucius's opulent house on the Palatine Hill. A slave stood before me—a rather beautiful young slave, for in all things Lucius was used to having the best—holding a small silver dish in each hand. In each dish was a dark, glistening dollop of garum.

"Taste it!" insisted Lucius.

I dabbed a finger into the thick, oily sauce in the dish to my left. I smelled it first, breathing in the sharp odor of pickled fish; reluctantly, I popped my finger into my mouth. The taste was powerful: salty and slightly tangy, the spices playing with remarkable complexity upon my tongue.

I smiled. "Actually, that's not bad. Not bad at all."

"Of course it's not bad!" said Lucius, his fair, chubby cheeks blushing as red as the curls on his head. "That's the finest garum on the market, made exclusively at my manufactory outside

Steven Saylor's mysteries featuring Gordianus the Finder form one of the best of the several Ancient Roman series currently in print. The latest book-length case for the finder (a "finder" being roughly the counterpart to a modern private eye), which will be published in June 2004 by St. Martin's Press, is *The Judgment of Caesar.* In it, Gordianus finally goes to Egypt for a fateful (and for someone, fatal) encounter with Cleopatra. †

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Pompeii. The only reason you claim not to be fond of garum, Gordianus, is because you're used to the awful stuff that's passed off as garum—smelly pots of fermented fish entrails with a few crushed olives and a sprig of rosemary thrown in for seasoning. Foul stuff! *This* is the real thing, made from farm-fattened sardines macerated in salt and seasoned with my own secret recipe of spices and herbs, aged for a full month before it's scooped into amphorae for shipment—not the mere twenty days that some of my competitors try to get away with."

I dabbed my finger into the garum and took another taste. "It's really quite delicious. This would be very good on meats. Or vegetables. Or you could simply eat it on a piece of flatbread. Or straight out of the jar! Yes, I could get used to eating this. I suppose it's expensive?"

"Very! But help me with my problem, Gordianus, and you shall have a lifetime supply, free of charge."

"And what would that problem be?"

"Taste the other sample."

I took a sip of wine to clear my palate, then dipped my finger into the dollop of garum to my right. I smelled it; popped my finger between my lips; closed my eyes to savor the heady aftertaste that suffused my entire mouth; then dipped my finger to try a second helping.

Lucius leaned toward me. "And?"

"Obviously, I'm no expert on garum, but . . ."

"Yes, yes?"

"I would say that these two samples are . . . identical. The same robust yet subtle taste; the same sublimely slippery texture. No difference whatsoever."

Lucius nodded gravely. "And that's the problem! The first sample you tasted is my own brand of garum. The second is from my competitor, that blasted Marcus Fabricius."

"Fabricius?"

"His little garum manufactory is just a stone's throw from my own, down in Pompeii. I ship all over the world, while Fabricius sells most of his product out of a little shop here in Rome. Every so often I purchase some of his garum, just to remind myself what an inferior recipe tastes like. I bought this batch today. Imagine my shock when I tasted it!"

"It does seems unlikely that garum from different makers could be so completely identical."

"Unlikely? Impossible! Fabricius must have stolen my secret recipe!"

So it happened, for the promise of a lifetime's supply of the world's best garum—and because Lucius Claudius is my good friend and

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steadfast patron—that I found myself down in Pompeii a few days later, taking a tour of Lucius's garum manufactory with the foreman, a tall, wizened slave named Acastus. I carried a letter of introduction from Lucius and posed as a would-be investor.

The compound was quite impressive, situated alongside a stream on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius, overlooking the city of Pompeii. Patios surrounded large sunken tanks in which the sardines were fattened; the murky water glistened with masses of darting silver fish. A warehouse held great stores of salt, herbs, and spices. Nearby, there was a shed where artisans cast clay vessels; storage pots for spices, as well as special pots for making the garum and amphorae for transporting it, were cast on site. There was also a large stable full of horses and wagons for transporting the finished product overland to various Italian cities as well as down to the waterfront to be shipped to markets as far away as Alexandria. Among those who could afford it, the garum of Lucius Claudius was a much sought-after, highly valuable commodity, the integrity of which he wished devoutly to safeguard.

At the center of the compound was the large, charmingly rustic house where Lucius stayed when he was in residence. Attached to the house were the guest quarters where I would be staying, as well as an annex containing Acastus's office, where pigeonhole shelves were stuffed with correspondence and tables were stacked high with ledgers. The view from the terrace was spectacular, with the rooftops of Pompeii spread below and the glittering bay dotted with sails beyond. Closer at hand, beyond the little wooded cleft cut into the hillside by the stream, I could see the roofs and terraces of a neighboring compound.

"What's that place?" I asked.

Acastus squinted. "Oh, that's the manufactory of Marcus Fabricius. They make garum, too, or something they call garum. Of no interest to a serious investor, I assure you. Their product is quite inferior."

"I see. Can you show me exactly how the garum is prepared?"

"What's that you say?"

I repeated my request, more loudly.

"Certainly," wheezed Acastus. He seemed so old and frail that any master but Lucius would likely have replaced him long ago; but Lucius had a kindly streak, despite his patrician snobbery. Acastus, he had assured me, was the most trustworthy of all the foremen on all his farms and manufactories (for garum was only one of Lucius's moneymaking enterprises). Acastus oversaw production, scheduled shipments, billed customers, and kept the books. At all these tasks, Lucius told me, Acastus excelled. But a foreman must be watchdog as well as overseer; if something odd was going on at the garum manufactory, were Acastus's eyes and

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ears sharp enough to notice?

With a doddering gait, he led me toward a terrace shaded by olive trees, where various slaves toiled over large clay pots. "Garum was invented by the Greeks, you know," he said. "In the old days it was a luxury that only the wealthiest Romans could afford. Nowadays everyone eats it, every day, on everything—or at least they eat something they call garum, whether it's worthy of the name or not. The best garum is still quite costly. Here, we'll watch this fellow make up a batch. Patro is your name, isn't it?"

"Yes, foreman." A bright-eyed young slave stood before a very large, wide-mouthed, flat-bottomed clay pot that came up to his knees. The bottom of the pot was already covered with a mixture of aromatic dried herbs. I leaned over the pot and breathed in the smells of dill, coriander, celery, fennel, oregano, and mint. No doubt there were other spices my nose was too untrained to discern.

"Who mixes the spices?" I said.

"What's that?"

"I said, who mixes—"

"The master comes down from Rome and does it himself, every other month or so," said Acastus.

This confirmed what Lucius had already told me. "But others must know exactly which spices are stocked in the warehouse. The recipe can't be a secret."

Acastus laughed. "The ingredients aren't the secret. It's the *proportions* that make the difference. The master does the measuring and the mixing himself, with no one else present. He's got a most refined palate, does the master. There are over thirty spices in all. You'd be hard-pressed to reproduce that exact mixture by tasting the finished product, or haphazardly trying this or that amount."

Patro, meanwhile, had fetched another pot, this one filled with sardines. These he spread over the layer of spices. "The fatter the fish, the better," commented Acastus.

Over the sardines, Patro spread a thick layer of salt. "Two fingers high," said Acastus. "More is too salty; less, not salty enough."

Patro repeated these three layers—spices, fish, salt—until the container was full. He then placed a lid on the pot, sealed the rim with pitch, and, with the help of another slave—for the pot must have been quite heavy—carried it to a sunny spot nearby.

"Now we let the mixture sit in the sun for seven days. No more, no less! After that, we'll stir it every day for twenty days. And then . . ." Acastus kissed his fingertips. "The finest garum on earth. I taste each batch myself before it's shipped out." He flashed a gap-toothed smile. "You were wondering, weren't you, why the master has kept me on, long past my prime? Not for my squinting eyes or my half-deaf ears. For *this.*" He tapped his nose. "And *this.*" He

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stuck out his tongue.

I heard laughter behind me and turned to see Patro and the other slave cover their mouths and look away. Acastus squinted in their direction. "Did you hear squirrels chattering?" he said. "Terrible pests. Known to open the garum pots during fermentation and scatter it all about. We have to throw the whole batch away when that happens."

"Would it spoil, if you simply resealed it?"

"Probably not, but we can't take the chance. The master has a standard to maintain."

"How often does this happen?"

"Perhaps once a month."

"I suppose you note the loss in your ledgers?"

"Of course! I keep strict accounting of all expenditures and losses, including spoilage. It's not a major problem; still, I feed the workers fresh squirrel as often as I can, so as to thin the ranks of those nasty pests!"

That night Acastus and I dined not on squirrel but on herb bread and liver pâté, with generous helpings of garum. Acastus went to bed early. I stayed up for a while, examining the ledgers, with his permission. Eventually I went to bed myself, with instructions to be awakened at the beginning of the work day.

A slave woke me at dawn. I roused myself, went down to the stream to splash my face, and ate a crust of bread on the terrace. Acastus was not yet up, but the rest of the compound was stirring. I strolled over to the fermentation area.

From a distance I saw young Patro with his hands on his hips, shaking his head. "Can you believe it? They've done it again, those damned squirrels!"

It appeared that the phenomenon Acastus had described had occurred during the night. The lid of the container that Patro had sealed the previous day lay on the grass, salt was scattered about, and a whole layer of sardines was missing.

"Mischievous little pests, aren't they?" I said.

Patro smiled. "More hungry than mischievous, don't you imagine? Either way, they're only as the gods made them. Well, I suppose I should get rid of this batch, then let Acastus know. Here, Motho, come help me carry it down to the stream."

Together, they lifted the open container. Walking slowly and awkwardly, they headed toward the wooded cleft in the hillside.

I headed for the cleft myself, walking fast and taking a different route. I was waiting on the opposite bank when they arrived. Instead of emptying the contents of the pot in the rushing water, they crossed the shallow stream and began to climb the opposite bank, huffing and puffing.

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"And where might you fellows be headed?" I said. They froze in their tracks and gazed up at me blankly.

"We . . . that is to say . . ." Patro frantically tried to think of some explanation.

"I think you're headed for Fabricius's place, to sell him that pot of garum. He'll only need to add some sardines and salt to the top, seal it up, and let it ferment. A month from now he can sell it at his little shop in Rome and claim that it's every bit as delicious as the famous garum of Lucius Claudius—since it *is* the garum of Lucius Claudius!"

"Please, this is the first time we've ever—"

"No, Patro. You've been doing this about once a month for almost half a year. That's how often such a loss is noted in Acastus's ledgers."

"But—*we* didn't spoil this batch. I was in my bed all night, and so was Motho—"

"I know you didn't. Nor did a squirrel. I did it myself, to see what would happen. I imagine that the very first time it happened, it was the act of a squirrel, or some other nocturnal pest. And you thought: What a pity to waste all that lovely, valuable garum. Why not sell it to the neighbor? What do you two do with the money Fabricius pays you? Enjoy a night of wine and women down in Pompeii?"

Their faces turned red.

"I thought so. But what was it you said about the squirrels? 'They're only as the gods made them.' Hard to blame you for taking advantage of the occasional accident—except that what began as an accident has become a regular occurrence. If it happens that *you two have been damaging batches of garum on purpose*—"

"You can't prove that!" said Patro, his voice rising to a desperate pitch.

"No. But I intend to stop it from happening again. What do you say? I'll turn a blind eye to this morning's mischief, in exchange for your promise that you'll never sell garum to Fabricius again."

The two of them looked very relieved and very repentant.

"Very well. Now, let's see you empty that spoiled batch of garum in the stream!"

On the way back to Rome, I pondered the dilemma I had gotten myself into. How could I assure Lucius Claudius that the problem had been taken care of without getting those two young slaves into trouble? And further, how could I let Lucius know, without getting Acastus into trouble, that the foreman needed an assistant with a sharper pair of eyes and ears and a more suspicious temperament?

I would think of something. After all, a lifetime's supply of the world's best garum was at stake! ●

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THE WOODCARVER

by Peter Turnbull

Sophie Crybacce found her husband, she found him when she was not looking for him, not expecting to see him, and she found him dead. She had returned from visiting her sister in Sheffield and had chosen to make the homeward journey to York early in the afternoon to avoid the rush-hour traffic which, despite the best efforts of the town planners and the North Yorkshire Highways Department, succeeds in log-jamming the medieval city each weekday between seven and nine A.M., and again between four-thirty and six-thirty P.M. Sophie Crybacce enjoyed the drive, a pleasant summer's day, only an hour between Sheffield and York, hood down, just her and her silver Mercedes Benz sports car, knowing that she was attractive and flaunting it, silk scarf and designer sunglasses. She had become a rich man's wife via the catwalk. She had never enough about her to become a top model, nor had she any desire to be such, having seen the catwalk only as a means of advertising herself as free, available, and in the market for a husband. She had taken her mother's advice. Her mother had been, and in fact was still, an embittered woman who had married "down," from relative wealth to the absolute poverty of a life on the dole, never really enough to eat and clothes from the charity shops. She had brought her two daughters up not to repeat her mistakes. The only thing that matters about a man, she would say, is the size of his wallet, not the size of his heart or his brain or anything else, just the size of his wallet; only his wallet and nothing but his wallet. Even before Sophie Crybacce and her sister had started school, their mother had ensured that they

The latest of Peter Turnbull's novels featuring the police of York City CID to see print in the U.S. is *Treasure Trove*. The author's British publisher, Allison & Busby, has an even more recent book scheduled for April of 2004. See *Reality Point*, available in the U.S. from online bookstores. The York series, to which this story belongs, has proved as successful as the author's earlier Glasgow tales. We'll have stories from both series in future issues. †

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both knew how to spell the word "wallet." The lesson had, as the north-country expression has it, been "dinned into" the heads of the two girls. And both had clearly been receptive to her advice, for Carol began to call herself by the classier name of Caroline, and had married a man much, much older than herself who happened to own a steel-making factory, though she constantly assured him that that did not influence her decision when he asked her to marry him. There were not many steelworks left in Sheffield by then, still less in private ownership, but Caroline's husband, who was older than her father, owned one, and a rambling Victorian mansion in the leafy and prestigious suburb of Dore. For if you live in Sheffield and you own a steelworks, then you live in Dore, with a Rolls Royce for him and a car, any car of her choice, for her, which in Caroline's case was a lovely beige BMW. Sophie Crybacce's husband, by contrast, was of her age group, and as well as his money—and she found that he had plenty of that—she liked him for his ruthlessness, his cunning, which she thought could enable him to outfox a fox. His not bothering about the niceties of back-slapping, not he, not Lucian Crybacce, for when he spilled your blood he would smile as he did so and you would see him smile, for when he stabbed, he stabbed from the front. Sophie Crybacce was proud of her husband, and she was proud of her sister, and their mother was proud of both of them. The women saw nothing of their father, who, at their marriages, felt overcome and socially gauche. So much so that on neither occasion could he give his father-of-the-bride speech, and went then to tend his pigeons and to fish in the canal and enjoy a pint of brown-and-mild with his flat-capped mates in the taproom of the Dog and Gun, which was a corner pub in the middle of terraced streets where he had lived all his life, and he did so as though his marriage and parenthood had never happened.

Sophie Crybacce drove into York and turned down Queen Street beneath the walls of the ancient city, across Lendal Bridge, then left in front of the towering splendour of the Minster and out of the city to the expensive northern side, to the village of Pocklington, to the Viking-inspired named Foss Avenue, to number 12, her new-built, airy, split-level house. Not quite as striking and impressive as Caroline's ivy-clad mansion, but his and hers, mainly his, and bought and paid for. Not bad for a girl of only twenty-seven, not bad at all, especially when her husband had in excess of thirty years' working life ahead of him. Who knows, she thought, what untold wealth would be theirs when they were as old as Caroline's husband.

She parked the car in the driveway and got out of the vehicle in the way she had been taught in deportment, to swivel on her bottom with both knees and ankles together, knees raised and toes

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pointed downwards. "A man may split his legs when getting out of a horseless carriage, but a lady never does, never, never, not even when wearing slacks, if you really must wear such unladylike attire. . . . Never." It was then she noticed that the front door of her house was ajar. That was unusual. It was very unusual. She walked from the car to the gloss-black painted door, her heels clicking on the concrete driveway beside the modest but neatly clipped lawn, and approached the door slowly. She glanced to her left and right. All was quiet in Foss Avenue, second cars on the driveways, no children playing, not at that time of the day and few at any other time. This was a place of upward mobility, a place where children came "later" if at all. She opened the door, pushing it wide, and called out, "Lucian . . . hello . . ." and her voice echoed in the spacious building. But there was no reply.

She saw the blood first, a smear, very noticeable in her "just so" home, then beyond the smear was a splatter, and beyond the splatter was a pool, and beyond the pool was her husband, crumpled on the floor, his white-towelling dressing gown having turned crimson.

George Hennessey turned his car into Foss Avenue and smiled warmly, as he always did, when he saw the car, a red-and-white Riley, circa 1947: sleek, with running boards, a "just don't make 'em like that anymore" sort of car. Still in daily service and maintained, he knew, by a small garage whose proprietor drooled over the vehicle and had, by means of pestering for years and years, finally extracted a promise from the owner that should she ever sell the car, she would offer him first refusal. It was a promise the car's owner had been able to give because she knew that she would never sell the vehicle: It had belonged to her father and in time she would bequeath it to her son. Yet giving the promise meant the garage proprietor would care for the vehicle as if it were his own. Behind the Riley was Sergeant Yellich's fawn-coloured Escort, modest by comparison, and behind that was the police car with the blue flashing light on its roof. The vehicles were parked outside a house across the door of which a blue-and-white police tape had been tied, and in front of which a constable stood. Hennessey halted his car behind the police car and stepped out onto the pavement. He glanced about him and saw a few people looking at the scene, discreetly so, from the front windows of their houses. He walked up to the house and stooped under the police tape and entered the building just as the bulb in the scene-of-crime officer's camera flashed. Sergeant Yellich stood in the hallway. Hennessey swept his hat from his wavy silver hair and nodded to Yellich.

"Afternoon, sir," Yellich said briskly. "One deceased male, believed to be one Lucian Crybacce."

"Crybacce? Unusual name."

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"It is a bit, isn't it, sir? He was stabbed repeatedly in the chest. He was found by his wife, lady in the front room."

"Lead on, Yellich, lead on. Introduce me."

Yellich opened the living room door and entered. Hennessey followed him and read the room: deep pile carpet, expensive furniture, ceiling-height mirror, top-of-the-range hi-fi; a room of wealth, but yet, he thought, a room which lacked life, akin to a photograph in an *Ideal Home* magazine.

"This is Detective Inspector Hennessey." Yellich spoke to Sophie Crybacce. Then said, "Mrs. Crybacce, sir. She found the body and phoned the police."

Hennessey nodded at the tearful lady, ashen-faced, wide-eyed. "I'm sorry. Not a good day for you, madam."

"I came home about an hour ago now, less. I've been to Sheffield to visit my sister. . . . The front door was open, Lucian was in the kitchen . . . blood everywhere."

"The obvious question—"

"No." Sophie Crybacce cut Hennessey off in mid sentence. "No, I don't know anyone who'd want to murder him."

"Have you noticed anything missing from your home?"

"No. . . . If it was burglary, this wouldn't be here." She indicated the hi-fi. "I haven't checked my jewellery, but there's no indication of the house having been ransacked, as you see."

"The door was ajar?"

"Yes."

"No sign of it having been forced?"

"No . . . well, see for yourself. He's in his dressing gown. He must have opened the door to pick up the mail. He would have switched off the alarm before opening the door. You see, my husband, his . . . he was . . . a businessman, an estate agent. . . . He was frightened of petrol being poured through the letter box and set alight, so he had one of those metal postboxes attached to the outside of the house. . . . You probably noticed it."

"I did, in fact. Confess I've been toying with the idea of having one fixed to the outside of my house for the same reason. You know, Britain is one of the few countries in the world where folks' mail is pushed through a flap in their front door. It's good to pick up your mail from the hall carpet rather than having to leave the house to collect it, but it does make you feel vulnerable."

"Doesn't it? I was very pleased when Lucian had the metal box fitted."

"Petrol has caught up with the letter box. The Victorians invented the things and the twentieth-century criminal mind saw the possibility of pouring petrol through them, but I digress. Your husband . . . he sounds as if he was a frightened man."

"He was cautious rather than frightened. He said that anticipa-

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tion was essential to a successful business career. Preventing petrol being poured through our letter box was just an example of his farsightedness, not a reaction to a specific threat or fear."

"I see, so he'd open the front door wearing pyjamas and dressing gown and at that point it seems that he was attacked and retreated back into the house."

"It seems that way. He's not a large man. I'm taller and heavier than him . . . but he survived because he had the killing streak that small men have, a sort of built-in aggression that comes from being pushed around too much during his childhood . . . it's a need to compensate, but it made him a driven man and he achieved a lot for someone who's still in his twenties."

"So it seems." Hennessey glanced around the room.

"It's fully paid up; the mortgage, I mean. We don't owe a penny. We've got a holiday home in Wales and we both have a Mercedes Benz. His is a huge saloon. So he's come a long way in a short time; humble beginnings, both of us have, despite his fancy name. But he didn't take a single prisoner en route, not Lucian. He was utterly ruthless."

"So he had enemies?"

"Oh yes, sold his first house when he was just nineteen. He said people on the way up make enemies; it's folk going nowhere that make friends. But I still don't know of anyone who'd want to murder him."

"Thanks." Hennessey walked into the kitchen. He saw the corpse and thought Sophie Crybacce had been kind when she described her husband as "not a large man." He was, in fact, very small, suffering, it seemed, from dwarfism.

The forensic pathologist glanced up at him but showed no emotion. "Afternoon, Inspector," she said.

"Dr. D'Acre." Hennessey spoke softly, as he found he tended to do in the presence of a corpse. "Have you been able to ascertain the cause of death? It appears to my untrained but experienced eye to be multiple stab wounds."

The tall, slender, short-haired woman stood. "Well, I would say that your untrained eye is quite correct. The amount of blood could only have come from a body whose heart was beating when he was stabbed, and there's no other indication of possible cause of death. I'll have to do a full postmortem, of course, but twenty-plus stab wounds . . . if I was a betting lady, I would bet large sums of money that the man was stabbed to death, and in a frenzy by all indications."

"Emotionally driven?"

"Passion, yes, definite passion, but of a negative nature, hate . . . that sort of passion. The wounds have a distinct semicircular pattern . . . see. . . . I'd say the murder weapon was a chisel."

"A chisel?"

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"Yes. Some chisels have a round blade when viewed in cross-section, carpenters use them for very delicate work. . . . Here, as you see, a small, narrow blade, only about half an inch from tip to tip, but with a distinct concave shape."

"As you say." Hennessey pondered the wounds. "Most to the body, a few to the face."

"Yes. . . . But I still think this is an emotionally driven murder. I know that there is a rule of thumb that states that murders of passion tend to feature injuries to the face because the murderer is attacking the personality, whereas murders which do not involve passion, such as aggravated burglary and serial killing, for example, tend to involve injury to the body because the murderer doesn't recognise the personality of the victim. But that's a rule of thumb and not absolute. . . . Mainly, I see this as a passionate murder because of this. . . ." Dr. D'Acre knelt. "This bruise, on the neck, under the chin, and here and here . . . fingertip bruising. You see, if I put my fingers close to the bruises like this . . . you'll see how my forearm covers the man's face. . . ."

"I see."

"My guess is that the man suffered facial injuries as he was being overpowered, probably near the front door—there is some blood splatter in the hall. Then, eventually, he was pinned to the floor here with the murderer's arm covering the face but the chest exposed, thus explaining the concentration of stab wounds to the chest. But if you've seen all you need to see, I'll have the body removed to York City for the P.M."

"Please carry on." Hennessey left the kitchen and returned to the living room, to a stunned and shaken Sophie Crybacce. "Mrs. Crybacce?"

The woman forced a smile and nodded as if to say, Yes?

"Where is your husband's place of work?"

"He has premises in York, in St. Peter's Gate, and an office in Selby, but he works at the York office."

"Business partner?"

"No. . . . He was a one-man band. Had employees, but no partner as such."

"And you don't think any of his business associates would have cause to murder him?"

"No . . . like I said. He wasn't popular, but that's the way he liked it. He seemed to thrive on being unpopular. . . . But I can think of no one who'd want to murder him. He probably wasn't easy to work for. At home he was a bit of a control freak, everything had to be his way. . . . I think that was because of his size, he was a bit self-conscious about it . . . had a chip on his shoulder."

"Socially?"

"A quiet social life. . . . Golf club for the clubhouse but he didn't

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play. He saw the club as a place to make business contacts."

"Family?"

"He was a classic rags-to-riches boy. Illegitimate, abandoned by his mother after he was born; children's home, a series of foster placements which failed; all of which made him bitter. But he provided a good home. Money is important. If you come from poverty, money is everything."

"He was an animal." The woman was slender, bespectacled, red skirt and blazer, black shoes. "I was on the verge of leaving. Not many people stay in his employment for more than six months."

"That's true." The second woman was dressed like the first, in what Hennessey deduced was the uniform of Lucian Crybacce's employees. They sat at desks in an office with schedules of property for sale on the wall or pinned up in the window. Most of them, Hennessey noted, were very upmarket.

"He went on all the time about offering a service to his clients, but he wasn't above overcharging and underselling to his wife."

"He did what?"

The two women glanced at each other. The first said to the second, "Go on, you may as well tell him."

"Tell me what?" Hennessey allowed an edge to creep into his voice.

"We didn't like what he did."

"Just tell me."

"He'd cheat his clients out of their money if he could. . . . You see, what he'd do was, if someone came and asked him to sell their property and they clearly didn't know what it was worth, especially if it was ripe for modernisation, he'd really try it on with them. Tell them it was worth only up to half what it was really worth and if they still agreed to let him act for them, he'd phone them within twenty-four hours telling them he'd got a cash offer for their house and recommended them to accept it. Most of them did, because they were so pleased to have a rapid sale. The market is depressed at the moment, some houses can take two years to sell, so a sale within twenty-four hours is like . . ."

"Manna from Heaven," offered the second woman.

"But in fact, the cash buyer was always the same, it was always a woman called Sophie Arbuthnot, whose address was in Wales, Arbuthnot being Mrs. Crybacce's maiden name. She retained an account in her maiden name when she married and the address in Wales was their holiday home."

"I see."

"So he then had a property at a knockdown price which he'd tidy up a bit, or modernise, and then put on the market for a greedy price. An easy way to make money and totally reprehensible."

"It happened recently, about six months ago. Poor guy, sort of

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wide-eyed and naive, very biddable, no hard edge to him at all, artist type, casually dressed. He waltzed in and asked us to market his house and I knew, I just knew, what was going to happen. . . . I was screaming at him in my head, 'Get out, get out' . . . but Crybacce saw him, recognised the type, and homed in on him, a fly on dead meat. 'It's all right, Jane,' he said, 'I'll handle this,' and escorted the fellow into his office. They left a minute or two later to view the property and Crybacce came back an hour later with that self-satisfied look he always has when he has snared a mug. He really was an evil little man. The original poisoned dwarf. I'm surprised he wasn't murdered a long time ago. Anyway, it all went to plan. The property was a terraced house, overlooking allotments, so there'd be no building opposite it, and it looked out over the river which was beyond the allotments. Lovely house for an artist and completely original, downstairs bath and toilet, for example. Crybacce sold it to Sophie Arbuthnot of Wales for the guy and then gutted it, new bathroom upstairs, new kitchen, paint job, and then sold it two months later for twice the price he'd purchased it for. When it was advertised, he put it smack in the middle of the window and I saw the previous owner walk past and glance at the display. I thought he was going to faint. I knew what was going on in his mind. He knew he'd been cheated, and he knew that it was Crybacce who'd cheated him. But that was four months ago. If he was going to murder Crybacce, he'd surely have done it before now, you'd think."

"Possibly." Hennessey opened his notepad. "But I think that I'd like to talk to him anyway. Do you have his name and address, perchance?"

The woman whose name clearly was Jane reached forward and tapped the keyboard of her computer. "Just type in Arbuthnot . . . that'll find the file," she said. " . . . Yes, here we are. Naylor. Ralph Naylor. I remember him now, he liked his Christian name to be pronounced 'Rafe,' which he said was the correct pronunciation anyway. He gave an address in Holgate."

"Holgate? Bit of a comedown for the man."

Hennessey drove to the address in Holgate that had been provided by the staff at Crybacce's. It was part of the City of York, well known to the police and not at all by the ancient tribe of camera, waist-bag, guide book, and sunglasses. It was an area of terraced houses, blackened with nineteenth-century pollution, just behind the railway station. Hennessey turned into St. Elfred's Walk and slowed his car to a halt. A small crowd had gathered outside one of the houses. A marked police vehicle and Yellich's fawn Escort were in attendance. Hennessey approached the scene and parked his car behind the police car. He left his vehicle and gently but

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firmly elbowed his way through the crowd and entered the house. Yellich stood in the narrow hallway and his shock at Hennessey's arrival amused Hennessey.

"I'll explain later, Yellich. What's happened?"

"A murder, sir."

"Two in one day. That's good going for this fair town."

"It's probably not coincidence, sir. The victim has multiple stab wounds, caused by a narrow blade which is concave in cross-section."

"Linked to Crybacce's murder?"

"Has to be, sir."

"Show me."

Yellich led Hennessey to the back room of the small house, to the murder victim, a young woman, blue T-shirt and jeans, the same stab wounds to the chest as had been sustained by Crybacce, the same bruising to the throat, the same few stab wounds to the face.

"Any sign of forced entry?"

"No, sir. It seems she knew her attacker."

"Have you looked over the house?"

"Not in detail, but there's some cash in the kitchen which would have been taken if it had been a burglary. . . . I would have thought, anyway."

"What are the sleeping arrangements?"

"Well . . ." Yellich was puzzled by the question but answered it anyway. "Two bedrooms, but one is given over to use as a studio, an artist's studio, paints and brushes and canvas everywhere. The other room is a bedroom, double bed. But I think she lived alone, no sign of male clothing in the house."

"Name?"

"Jennifer Tyrie, according to the gas bill and other mail on the hall table."

"That's enough to be working on for the time being. Who found her?"

"A neighbour . . . noticed the front door lying open, no sound or movement from within. I mean, this is Holgate . . . so she went in, calling as she did so. Then she called the police. I arrived just before you did."

"I was following the trail of a fellow called Ralph Naylor, pronounced 'Rafe.' "

"I've seen that name, it's on the table in the hall, a letter addressed to him." The two officers returned to the hall, and Yellich picked up a letter from the table. He handed it to Hennessey.

Hennessey read the envelope, noting how a neat female hand had crossed out the address and written a forwarding address beside it. "St. Jude's Terrace. Where's that?"

"Next street, sir."

"Right, I'll take a stroll round there, see what I see. You carry on

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here, you know the form, S.O.C.O. and the pathologist."

"Very good, sir."

Hennessey walked the few hundred feet to St. Jude's Terrace, to number 134, being the forwarding address as written on the envelope found in the hallway of Jennifer Tyrie's home. He knocked on the door. It was opened quickly by a bespectacled man in his forties.

"Mr. Naylor?" Hennessey asked.

"No . . . he's not in at the moment. You are?"

"Police." Hennessey showed his ID. "And you are?"

"Curbishley. Andrew Curbishley. This is my home. Ralph has a room here, he moved in recently, just until he gets himself back on his feet. Things have not been too good for him of late."

"No?"

"No. I dare say an astrologer would say that a heavy planet is passing through his aspect."

"Tell me about him."

"Why? Is he in trouble?"

"Let's just say we'd like a chat with him. When did you last see him?"

"Last night, but I heard him leave the house very early, before dawn. Unusual for him; he usually spends the day in his bed. If he hasn't anything to get up for, he won't get up."

"It would help your friend if you told me what you know about him."

"You'd better come in."

Hennessey followed Curbishley into his house. It was cosy, he thought, comfortably furnished with what appeared to be second-hand furniture from charity shops. The walls were lined with bookshelves, each one crammed with books.

"You're not employed, Mr. Curbishley?" Hennessey remarked as he sat, invited, in a vintage armchair of interwar period, he thought, the sort that people would have sat in to listen to Mr. Churchill speak to the nation on the wireless.

"I gave it up to devote my life to writing science fiction. I actually manage to scratch a living. I dare say it's fairly low-grade stuff, spaceships that run out of fuel, that sort of thing. My existence is that of a garret-dwelling, starving artist, but it's better than working at a job which does your head in. There's more things in life than money."

"And Mr. Naylor?"

"He was a woodcarver."

"Was?"

"He says his tools have gone cold. It's an expression he uses for loss of creativity. He's had a bad time of late, the bottom has dropped out of his life."

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"Oh?"

"Well, he was very well set up in a modest sort of way, a lovely little terraced house, very basic but that was all he needed, nice view of the river and he spent his days carving wood, producing some lovely work, selling it, getting known. . . . Gave up teaching to do it, as I did. We're both ex-teachers. Then he met a woman, pushy woman, only child, everything had to be her own way. She lives just in the next street, in fact, Jennifer Tyrie by name."

Hennessey remained silent.

"They picked up with each other and instead of she moving in with him, she bullied him into selling his house and moving in with her in the house that she's renting. Ralph being Ralph, he did just that, sold his house and moved in with Jennifer. Then he found out that the estate agent had stolen his property. He'd managed to make Ralph part with it for less than half its value. He saw it advertised a few weeks later in the window of the estate agent who'd sold it for him. It was fairly obvious what had happened, but he carried on living with Jenny, effectively becoming her patron, supporting her as she produced her very unsaleable paintings, buying a car at her insistence, clothes, foreign holidays. For an artist, she's a very materialistic woman. Such was the expense that in just six months all the money Ralph had from the sale of his house had evaporated. Then she showed him the door. Found someone else, she said."

"Oh. . . ."

"I found him living in a bed-sit like a student. He'd lost everything. . . . He was a man in his forties and in six months he'd lost his world. He was close to topping himself so I invited him to take a room here until he got himself sorted, but the main problem was not the loss of his house and his financial security, but the loss of his creativity as he took on board just how much the estate agent had fleeced him and how Jenny had spent all his money, then kicked him out as soon as he was penniless. That's when he said his tools had gone cold. He said, 'They've killed me,' and he said he was going to kill them, and I thought, Good for you!"

"You thought that?"

"Yes. For the first time in his life he was showing a bit of fight. He's learned a hard lesson, but at least he won't get pushed around anymore, that's how I saw it. Why . . ." Curbishley's voice trailed. "Oh, he hasn't . . ."

"Do you know where I can find him?"

"Try the Shoulder of Mutton, at the end of the street. If he's not in his bed, he usually spends his time in there these days."

"It's not the money." Ralph Naylor revealed himself to be bald, bespectacled, casually dressed, very much an artist-type in Hen-

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nessey's view. "That I can live without. It's *there.*" He held his hands up. "Maybe I was a bit naive but when I was naive at least I could produce. Between them they took the only thing I had. If you are a creative personality and you lose your creativity, you are nothing. I believe that that was why Ernest Hemingway committed suicide."

"Really?" Hennessey stood over the man and found time to glance round the interior of the Shoulder of Mutton and thought that were it not for the electrical gadgets here and there, he might well have stepped back into Victorian times—high ceilings, oak panelling, wrought-iron tables with wooden surfaces.

"He went down with depression, they gave him ECT and succeeded in shocking the illness out of him, but they also blew the creativity out of him. By then, he was a wealthy man and could have spent the remainder of his life blasting elephants to pieces or pulling very big fish out of the Gulf of Mexico. But without his creativity all that was meaningless, so he topped himself. I can understand why he did it."

"He didn't murder the doctors, though. There is that difference in your action and his."

"No . . . but the doctors acted in good faith; I'm a victim of malice." He sat in front of an untouched pint of beer. "Don't really feel like drinking."

"I can see that. Where's the murder weapon?"

"I left it in the backyard of Jenny's house. The police will have found it by now."

When Ralph Naylor had been charged and led wide-eyed to the remand cells, Hennessey left the paperwork to Yellich and drove home to his house in Easingwold. He supped and then walked his dog. Later he stood in the garden of his house and said hello to his wife, who he knew was there. She had designed the garden and her ashes were scattered there. She had been so young, all was ahead of her, but life had simply left her one day when she was walking in the street. All the medics could offer by way of explanation was "Sudden Death Syndrome." As he stood there he felt a warmth wrap around him which was more than the warmth of the evening.

He packed an overnight bag and drove to Skelton, north of York, with its tenth-century church and prestigious houses. He walked up the gravel-covered drive of one such house, detached, half-timbered, as bats flew and darted in the air above him.

Inside the house, at the kitchen table, as the "ankle-biters" ran about upstairs, putting themselves to bed, he reached across the table and took the hand of the lady of the house. "I feel sorry for him, really," he said.

"I think I know what you mean." Louise D'Acre nodded. "Three victims, in a sense." ●

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The Foreigner's Watch

by Patricia McFall

Tim Alter separated the hotel curtains, turning his back on his crew mate Jackson, who had claimed the better twin bed by throwing his duffel right in the middle of it. Tim wanted to see if there was any kind of view, any sign of this "insurrection" along the coast that had kept them from their original port. Another stop on the Asian leg of the yacht race, the last in a string of watery towns whose names he couldn't pronounce and probably wouldn't remember. Tim closed the curtains in disgust at the sight of a three-inch-long cockroach on the water pipe just outside the window. The view beyond was nothing but a brick wall. It must have been the heat that grew things so large in this sweaty part of the world. Tim's policy was to stay with the air conditioning and try not to think about anything.

A writing instructor who ran the extension programs at Cal State Fullerton from 1999-2002, Patricia McFall has done some exceptional work in the crime genre. Her debut mystery, 1992's *Night Butterfly*, was chosen one of the year's ten best crime novels by the *L.A. Times*, and of her first mystery short story, published in the book *Mystery Street*, the *Boston Herald* said: "worth the price of the paperback." Ms. McFall says her ambition now is to "write one worth the price of a hardcover."

"You coming?" Jackson said in a voice so flat with lack of enthusiasm that it told what answer he wanted.

"Don't think so."

Jackson looked relieved. He was basically a good guy, and he probably sympathized even if he hadn't seen what actually happened. It wasn't Tim's fault, but the skipper still thought it was. Everyone would be listening to him relive how Tim had supposedly waited too long to give the sign. Tim wasn't going to sit there and pretend he didn't know the skipper had been the one to delay, the damned sail wrapping around the mast like a dead sailor's shroud. The race was dead enough now, and it was easier for the skipper to blame his crew leader than say he was the one who messed up himself. Losing was bad enough, but then the boat had

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been rerouted down the coast, and they were all tired as well as disappointed. Going out with them was an impossible choice: Tim could either keep his job or keep his pride. He simply chose not to choose.

Jackson stood, silhouetted in the open doorway. "We have two taxis waiting. There's room."

"No, really. I'm tired. Go on."

Jackson, his duty met, shot out the door without another word.

Tim showered quickly and, since he didn't like to be alone, took the stairs down the four dank, warm flights to the lobby level rather than wait for the unreliable elevator. There was supposed to be a nightclub, though the International Hotel didn't look big enough for much. It was about the only game inside the walled compound, though. By the time he got to the lobby, the rest of the racing crew had gone into town to submerge the loss in local alcohol. No taxis anywhere. He was glad he'd begged off. Even outside the lounge, Tim heard music thumping against the wall. He nodded at the doorman as he entered, the beat louder now, a series of detonations. Good. He didn't want to think, just sit and have a couple of beers, maybe dance if there were any good-looking women. Usually in these clip joints they made sure there were, even if they had to scrounge them up from the next town over or whatever. Even if you had to pay for the lady's drinks and God knew what else.

Jackson had said that the International compound was built as R&R for American servicemen back during the Vietnam War, and it looked old enough. Tim pictured his father here, wild young version who flew helicopters, pretty impressed with himself, a girl on each arm, but oblivious to the greed and desperation in their glances. The last time Tim had seen his father, the old man had bragged about feeling invincible, being invincible. "I'm still around, aren't I?" said Dad. "Most of the guys I knew didn't have what it took."

Tim had just looked at him, realizing that he was older than his father had been during his Asian tour. Still no clue, his old man. No survivor's guilt, no respect for the cosmic roll of the dice, flip of the coin, track of the bullet that said you live, you die. "Maybe you're still alive because of dumb luck, not because you control the universe. I thought combat was supposed to teach you that," Tim would tell him one day.

The nightclub's dim lighting disguised how run-down it was. Tables and chairs surrounded what passed for a dance floor in front of a stage where a cover band's full-on amps disguised how badly they played. Besides some tourist couples and a few other Westerners, there were two tables where local women and men in same-gender groups sat eyeing while pretending not to notice each other. Everyone shouted over the music. The air conditioner was inadequate, and you could feel the bodies marinating. Tim decided that this nightclub, beached in a foreign land's second-rate

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port town with a sign in English over the bandstand proclaiming its name Opportunity, this outpost at the end of the known world, with its mood of lust without expectation, fit his mood exactly.

He seated himself at the bar, knowing they could charge you ten times as much if you sat at a table, where several thirsty women might swarm you within seconds. Just when he'd decided he was only there to watch the show, he saw a white woman come through the door alone. Maybe she'd found exactly the right place, too—whether it was a lost yacht race or some psychic defeat, it didn't matter here. Thin and fair and almost unremarkable, she wasn't beautiful. But her gray-blue eyes were, the expression at once hopeless and still searching for next of kin. It was as though life had been a terrible swindle up until now, and her very ill-fortune made her believe her luck had to change. Somehow he could tell she wasn't American. He guessed British; you found them everywhere. She was walking toward the bar, toward him.

Before she could say anything, Tim said, "Hello. Fancy a drink?"

In a clear English accent, she said, "That would be lovely," floating weightlessly onto the barstool beside his, leaning in to be heard and extending a fine-boned white hand. It was small and pale, trembling like a dove trapped in his suntanned, work-weathered hand. "I'm Ann Gamble. Would you be one of the yachtsmen, then?"

Tim smiled. "Word must get around," he said, gesturing for the bartender, who brought a drink to Ann without being told. Tim's smile turned into a laugh. "Guess that saves me the line where I ask if you come here often."

"Oh dear, how embarrassing, but I won't deny it. My elbows have worn a hole in the bar by now, believe me."

"I believe you." He ordered a San Miguel beer for himself; safer to get something in a bottle. "So you live here?"

"I won't deny that, either."

The band took a break, so they were able to talk without shouting, though a stereo now played the unintelligible minor-key wailing of singers who must be complaining about being stuck in a place like this all their lives.

But Ann was no complainer. She was a good listener, and Tim felt easy talking to her, even if he held back telling her the reason why he was in the nightclub by himself rather than with the rest of the crew. He said, "I was here so I could meet you."

She blinked. Perhaps with her British reserve she was surprised at his forwardness. While she assimilated his interest in her, she was silent. Then she surprised him in exchange by asking, "Do you dance, Tim?"

The band had returned, and after one fast version of "Roxanne," turned to slow enough numbers for Tim to get by on the dance

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floor. Several other couples were out there, too, so nobody could really tell what he was doing with his feet. In a heavy accent, the singer was saying she was every woman in the world to him. And there was some kind of magic in the brothlike air, because for a few minutes, with Ann light in his arms, Tim forgot where he was, the dance transporting him as though it were a ritual. Didn't the Hindus believe that? It didn't have to make sense. He pictured a cloud in a hot turquoise Asian sky, the image of a naked goddess, dancing. He wondered if Ann's light linen dress would slip off easily, what she might be wearing underneath, what she'd look like naked. But it went farther than that. He wondered what she would look like with sleep in those seeking eyes, barely focusing in the morning. Maybe every morning.

During the next break they had more to drink, and Ann told him why the boat had been rerouted down the coast. There was savage fighting between government troops and rebels, moving south along the coast. A lot of people were getting ready to leave, she said, but she thought she'd stay. Tim's mind was still getting away from him, wishing he wasn't in bad with the skipper, thinking they might take her along. He needed to clear his head, and the steady intake of beer on an empty stomach wasn't helping. "If you're hungry, let's get something to eat," he suggested. "There's a restaurant here, right?"

They situated themselves in the cafe, and when he returned from using the men's room he knew he was way too happy to see her quietly sitting there, as though he'd been half expecting her to disappear, to get away. In the middle of dinner, he asked her, "Why don't you leave if things are getting dangerous?"

She smiled sadly. "The rebels have been fighting for a long time. It's simply unusual for them to be this far south. The action is usually to the north, near the border. The embassies haven't sent out any advisories for the southern provinces."

"Yet," he said.

She paused. "Anyway, here we are in a tourist compound, and I can't imagine they'd want to bother with us. I can't afford to leave on my own, and if we're evacuated, well, they'll have to send me home free of charge, won't they?" She was obviously trying to make light of a serious situation. Tim wanted to help but didn't know how to put it without acting like a jerk forcing himself into her life, so he let the topic die.

As if by agreement, they ordered a bottle of champagne with dinner, celebrating something nameless but singular. Tim didn't want the meal to end, and when it did, he didn't want the evening to end, but Ann said she didn't want to go back into the cabaret. Feeling like a teenager, he asked her for a date he was sure he

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wasn't going to get: "Would you like to go anywhere else, show me around a little?"

Again, Ann's silence bore weight. "It's probably cooled off outside," she said at last, "but it's getting late, so why don't we just go for a walk?"

They could hear the music playing out on the beach side of the hotel, and they danced on the sand, maneuvering themselves closer together. When the music stopped, Tim thanked the moon for being full and clear and unapologetically romantic as they walked away from the harbor and along the deserted silver strip of water, his arm around her shoulders. She didn't tell him not to kiss her, so he tried that, too, and she was surprisingly responsive, in her soft, sweet way. She pulled back gently and said, "Would you like some sherry?"

He knew that she meant in her room.

"I'd love to," he murmured, kissing her forehead.

As a long-term guest, Ann had a cottage with a beach view, still inside the walled compound of the hotel. Compared with his very basic room, it was not at all bad: rattan furniture with striped green and white cushions around a coffee table on which were a vase of fresh flowers, a decanter with two glasses, and a photograph album. The book's cover was tapestry depicting airplanes, babies, graduates, wedding bells, photographs, suitcases, the word *Memories* woven into the fabric among the images.

Ann offered and poured sherry from the decanter. Tim wanted to know everything about her all at once, so he said nothing.

Instead, he flipped open the album to the middle. "Oh, sorry." He'd turned to a wedding picture of Ann and some guy with thick glasses and an intelligent face.

"Don't be sorry. You see—" She was clearly trying with her expression to preempt Tim's reaction—"David is gone—but not what you're thinking. He may not be dead." She looked at Tim as though he could tell her where David was if she asked him nicely enough. "Oh dear, I'm making a mess of it. Let me start over."

She took the book from Tim, closed it, put it firmly on the table, and picked up her sherry glass with a shaking hand, composing herself as she took a sip. She set the glass down and began slowly, "My husband David is a journalist. He was covering the rebels near the border. He vanished a year ago after he'd gone to interview one of the rebel leaders. There's been no word since, no indication he was kidnapped. In fact, the rebels say not. The government men have all been bribed for information, but nobody seems to know what happened to him. His mates and I have tried everything. I've run through my money. All I have left is this," she said, reaching into a pocket in the skirt of her dress. She brought out a beautiful wrist watch and like a hypnotist held it up swing-

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ing, the band gleaming gold and flashing diamonds and emeralds. "I've been to this sort of pawnshop in the Chinese section twice," she went on, handing Tim the watch while she got a business card from her pocket. "The second time I worked up the courage to go inside and ask for an estimate of what it was worth. More than enough to get me back to England without borrowing any more from my family, but I couldn't do it. You see, it's all that I have left from David. I sold the rest. Now the trouble's moving south, I should go back and get the money and go, but I'm such a coward."

Her eyes were brimming with tears as she turned to him, obviously upset that she'd made this confession to a near stranger. "It's a year today he disappeared, and I know I've taken advantage of your kindness. I don't want to be alone and—"

Tim didn't know what to say to comfort her, it was all so complicated and sad. He mumbled, "Don't apologize, Ann, I'm just glad I met you—"

And then he found himself grabbing her, kissing her with a spontaneous passion that almost scared him, the desire like an uncontrolled storm, pulling off the linen dress and finding her body lovely, its contours a perfect fit with his own, their movements as sure as the tides.

A very long time later, she slept.

But Tim Alter sat awake in Ann's bed thinking until the sun rose. He had a plan by then, a way to make everything come out right. He wasn't going to let her down, had to help. It was the right thing to do. He took the watch and the business card from the nightstand, picked his way silently across the room to his clothes, dressed, and left the room. He headed back to the hotel along the shore and through the trees, maybe a couple of blocks, not surprised to find the front desk abandoned at this early hour. But the lights were all out, the hall lit very dimly from windows at each end, and he reached his room with rising apprehension. Tim knew something was way off when he saw both his and Jackson's bags gone, and a note left on his bed saying, "Where in hell WERE you? Get to the boat NOW or we're leaving you behind. J."

His heart beating fast, Tim took the stairs two at a time. There was nobody in the lobby, no cabs out front. He ran out of the hotel compound, all the way to the excuse for a harbor, not much more than a marina. He was going to ask the skipper to pay him off right now, let him stay behind.

Then he saw it. There were the slips, but no boats. None. All gone, except a couple of sampan-looking things with men loading bundles. He knew that asking them what was going on would be a waste of time. He went back to the International, now saw that there were a few people around, and he stopped a man he recognized, in a hotel uniform, and asked him for an explanation.

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"There is no cause for worry, sir. Just some soldiers are going to be using our harbor, sir."

"What do you mean not worry? My boat's gone!"

"Yes, sir, every foreign boat left very early, but you can reach your boat farther down the coast. You see, here is the car that takes you down there," he said, pointing out a cab that had come up the circular drive. "Please don't worry. He will take you. Your room was already paid, sir, and your friends have your belongings with them."

Well, that was good news, at least. "Look, I have to take care of something first." The desk man seemed honest enough, but there was no way he'd ask him to return the watch to Ann. Besides, his plan might still work. He could come back.

The uniformed man was jabbering with the driver and shaking his head as he called out, "Mr. Alter, sir, he cannot stay. The ride takes more than an hour, sir, and they are waiting for you."

There seemed to be no choice. Tim got into the backseat of the cab and tried English. The driver spoke a little, so after they'd pulled out, he explained that he would like to stop at an address on the way. Without getting out the watch, Tim slipped the card from his pocket and handed it to him, saying, "I want to go here for a few minutes. I'll pay you extra to do that."

"I don't want trouble," the driver said, looking gravely at him in the rearview mirror.

"It's all right," Tim said with force. "I'll take responsibility. I can pay."

All the people who weren't around the hotel complex must have come into the city, Tim thought. The crowds were so bad that the cab crawled among pedestrians and pedicabs, an old lady carrying a monkey in a bamboo cage. The day was hot again already, the people edgy, sullen, unwilling to yield though the driver honked with annoying frequency. The place smelled like an open sewer. A boy spit at the windshield as the car crept by, then turned and dodged between people down the mouth of an alley, his tattered clothes flying as he shoved past a group of men gathered there. The cab's radio droned incomprehensibly.

By the time they'd reached the Chinese pawnshop where Ann said all the foreigners did business, Tim had almost decided to turn back, but then he realized that he couldn't go back with the watch and have to explain why he'd taken it for no reason. Besides, the crowds were much sparser here, farther inland from the harbor. He pressed some cash into the driver's hand to overcome the unreliability he read in the man's apprehensive expression.

"It's okay. I'll be right back," Tim told him. "Don't go anywhere."

The inside was dark, but the old pawnbroker was there, sitting in the back on a stool behind a glass counter. "I've brought this in for Ann Gamble," Tim explained.

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Without speaking or giving any sign of knowing Ann's name, the old man put his hand out for whatever it was this time, and when he saw the gems on the lady's watchband, he reached into a pocket of his apron, brought out a loupe with a light inside, and considered them carefully, nodding at last in recognition.

Not even offering to bargain, he reached into another pocket and counted out a pile of money onto the glass. Tim did a fast calculation, saw that it was at least eighteen hundred dollars, more than enough to take care of both of them, even if the boat and the skipper and the crew left without him. Relieved, Tim grabbed the big wad of money, took a paper the man scratched out, and almost ran for the door, stuffing cash into his pockets.

As soon as he got outside, he saw the cab was gone.

No, there it was. Well up the block, slowly driving away through the throngs. He pushed along the gutter trying to catch it, waving his arms and yelling, but had to give it up as hopeless after half a block. Now what? Find a pedicab? Call another taxi? He turned back. His yelling had drawn attention from the far end of the side street where a group of young men approached, one in front shaking his head and waving him away, "No good for you here. You go home now," he shouted, looking more worried than angry.

Something inside Tim cleared then, like a lifting fog, and he knew what he had to do. He should never have taken her watch without telling her, it wasn't his call, and he couldn't be out on the street carrying this kind of cash. The watch he could hide, the wads of money he couldn't. He smiled at his accosters with harmless good will, backing up to the pawnshop, going inside again. They didn't follow him; maybe he was just a sideshow. He went back to the old man, put the money on the counter, and put out his hand.

The old man counted the money, then shook his gray head. "Need ten percent more."

"No. I changed my mind."

"You make deal." Again the old man shook his head. He wasn't going to budge.

The watch wasn't on the counter, but Tim reached over and grabbed the front of his apron. "I said no deal. Now give it back."

The old man was surprisingly strong. Tim's angle was not a good one, leaning over the counter. He let go suddenly, pushing him hard, and the old man fell backwards over his stool, his head striking the shelf behind him as he slid to the floor. It was very still then, the sounds of the city crowds muffled by his own fear breathing fast. The pawnbroker didn't move, and Tim dashed around to the back of the counter, tried to rouse him, lifted him to see a small puddle of blood under the loose, limp old head. He looked at the face then. The eyes were dead. The man was dead.

He checked himself, saw blood on his right hand. Repulsed, he

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tried to shake it clean, instead speckling the man's apron front and chin with red spray. He steeled himself, reached into the pockets with tears of panic and desperation welling in his eyes, and gasped in relief when he found the watch, Ann's watch.

His mind like four blank walls, Tim forced himself to walk, not run, from the store. As he closed the door behind him, he heard shouting down the street, then glass breaking and automobile horns, so he walked up the street, in the direction from which he'd come in the cab. He shoved his hand into his pocket to hide the blood and, touching paper, realized he still had the money.

But there was no going back now.

He was pushing against a crowd that wanted to go toward trouble, not away. A boy with no front teeth laughed at him, punching him in the arm.

What was he going to do when he got back to the hotel? How to explain himself? How to explain that the man was dead, but it wasn't intentional, and that he hadn't meant to end up with both the watch and the money? Behind him was shouting, a gang of boys and men, some with improvised clubs and blades. He kept moving forward even when someone struck him in the ribs, then a stunning blow over his ear. It ought to hurt, but didn't. Did they know about the pawnbroker? Is that why they were after him? An angry human whirlpool, part festival and part riot, swirled around and past him. Windows shattered. In the distance, he heard sirens. He was very dizzy but kept walking as though toward a goal. The watch was still clenched in his hand, and he held it to his ear. It was ticking like a heart as he staggered ahead, one foot in front of the other. Finally he put it back in his pocket, some part of him advising him to hide it.

A police car was pulling through the crowd, and Tim put his hands up in the air, waving them, but that made him even dizzier. He stumbled back against a building, where he realized that he was hurt, that pain was a helmet crushing his head, a serpent coiling, squeezing the breath from his lungs. He pressed one arm against his side, saw the Asian man wearing a uniform, the crowd parting for his drawn gun, continuing to shout and jeer. Tim no longer knew what he hoped for, which he would choose, an honest policeman or a corrupt one. Maybe the man would speak English. Maybe he would understand. Maybe he never even got a report of a dead shopkeeper.

Tim could only look down now. He sank as though inside a great funnel, rivulets of blood coursing down the arm clenched to his ribs, dripping off his fingertips into his right shoe. Ann was waiting for him, must have found him gone, her watch gone and thought . . . and thought . . .

If he could only get back to her, he could explain. He could explain everything. ●

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Art by June Levine

To Catch a Falling Star

by Barbara Callahan

Stella Stanley came into the boutique last month, *the* Stella Stanley, the movie star whom I adored in my teen years, the movie star who answered my fan letter by sending me a black-and-white glossy photo of her dipping a toe into her heart-shaped swimming pool. I still have the photo, and I still have the memories of watching her so long ago on Saturday afternoons at the Logan Theater.

In the dark, impersonally intimate movie theater I admired her as the crusading reporter who broke the story of the capture of the Essington kidnappers; I sighed as she lifted her petticoats to skip down the winding staircase into the arms of returning Civil War hero Jonathan Wainwright; I wept when in prison stripes she vainly proclaimed her innocence on the way to the electric chair in *Innocence Denied.*

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At my vanity table with the pink tulle skirt, I hopelessly willed my mirror to transform my besieged adolescent skin into the creamy, rose-tinted complexion of Stella Stanley. My eyes teared as I painfully plucked eyebrows to achieve the perfect arch that enhanced her green eyes. My fingers burned from dipping wads of cotton into peroxide to simulate the luster of her golden hair. My entire body ached from the exercise routine I believed would sculpt me into the size of the costume Stella wore in *Slave Girl of Sparta.*

Nothing worked. I remained me, plain un-Stellalike me, but nevertheless loved for forty-one years by my husband George. Last year, during the final battle with his illness, he and I watched videos together, mostly starring Stella, that reminded us of our teenage years holding hands in the Logan Theater.

To ease the loneliness of widowhood, I took a job as a sales associate at Be a Star Boutique—Clothes for Making an Entrance. Mostly I worked by myself, except for the few hours a week the owner, Derrick Breen, spared from his jaunts to the casinos. Having inherited the shop from his mother, he enjoyed the income but not the interaction with the clientele, women of a certain age—my age—who, like me, got their fashion sense from the films of the 'forties. No denims or tees in the boutique, but plenty of flared organzas, sequined taffetas, fur-trimmed collars and hemlines, tiny pillbox hats with wisps of veils, large-brimmed hats that dipped coyly over an eyebrow, boalike scarves, fake alligator purses and shoes, and jewelry boxes overflowing with rhinestone chokers, earrings, and bracelets.

Aware of the importance of set design, Derrick's mother had the walls painted shocking pink and installed black vinyl banquettes to serve as props for discarded mink stoles tossed there in casual neglect by customers imitating the stars of the 'thirties and 'forties. A tape of romantic 'forties songs softened up sales resistance from husbands wrenched from the golf course. On the walls, life-sized posters of stars dressed in outfits from their films gazed haughtily down on the wannabes who came to the store. The Stella Stanley poster featured the actress dressed in a mid-calf cocktail dress

This story gave its author, Barbara Callahan, "a chance to attempt to tell how much movies meant to viewers during World War II, and how much the fashions in the films influenced women." It was also inspired, she told *EQMM,* by the sadness she felt when she learned about a star of the 'forties who had a problem similar to that of the actress in this tale. Ms. Callahan makes her home in New Jersey and is a longtime contributor to this magazine. †

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with fishtail peplum. Since the poster was in black-and-white, as was the film, I never knew the color of the dress—until she stood last month under her poster wearing the same dress. Fuchsia, it was fuchsia.

When I saw her across the room, I had to stop tallying the day's receipts and sit down on a banquette. For a moment, I was at a movie, staring at a clever special effect, that of a woman who stepped out of a poster, then turned around to study her likeness. The illusion abruptly disappeared when she moved away from the wall toward the rack of silk lounging pajamas: Time had not stopped for her as it had for that portrait-gazer Dorian Gray. Only her lovely green eyes had been spared. Unnerved by the shock of seeing her so different from her video perfection, I fumbled with the jewelry on the nearest counter and did not gush over to her.

After a few minutes in recovery mode, I straightened my shoulders and started toward her, then stopped to watch a graceful scene. Miss Stanley was draping a long green silk scarf dotted with gold sequins around her neck. To catch the effect, she tilted the three-sided mirror on the accessories counter, pulling both sides inward to view the scarf from all angles. She's still lovely, I thought, retaining the bone structure and flair of long ago, and I decided to tell her so—until she unwrapped the scarf from her neck and let it slide to her shoulder, then guided it slowly down her arm to her tote bag like a herpetologist returning a pet snake to its carrying case. I backed up to the cash register and waited for her to pay, but she fluffed up her blond bob, swept past me in queenly style, and murmured, "Nothing today, but I will be back."

Aghast, I realized I had been an audience of one to a role I had never seen Stella Stanley play. Was she really a shoplifter? Could someone of her prestige and wealth—a long career and alimony from three rich husbands—not afford a scarf? Of course she could. She must be one of those sad people afflicted with kleptomania. Reporting her to the police was out of the question. I could not do that to the woman who had brought such blessed forgetfulness to George and me last year.

Nor could I relate the incident to Charley Sutton, the thirtyish gossip columnist who writes the sleazy *The Dis List* for the local paper, mostly about residents picked up for Driving Under the Influence. He frequently hangs out at the coffee shop next-door to the boutique in the hope of spotting a star shopping for a copy of a dress she wore in a movie. Several of Charley's items, fed to him by his friend and my boss, Derrick, made it to the tabloids, such as "Former bombshell Dixie Lane was seen at Be a Star Boutique trying to squeeze her size-sixteen bod into a slinky black number like the one she wore in *Rhapsody.* She burst into tears when the zipper popped, then ran half-clothed out to the street to her

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patient hubby who waited in his car. He paid for the dress before they sped off to a local watering hole. I hope it had a supply of Twinkies for Dixie."

Charley slammed into the shop minutes after Stella Stanley left. Meticulously unkempt, most likely to show he was involved in more important things than personal hygiene, he propped his elbows on the counter and stared at me through wire-rimmed lenses flecked with dandruff.

"Well, what have you got for me?" he demanded, wetly transferring a toothpick from east to west.

"Not a thing, Charley."

"Hey, don't give me that. I just seen Stella Stanley sashay outta' here, looking smirky, like she just pulled off something. I read somewhere that she was once picked up for shoplifting but the charges were dropped. So did she make off with some loot?"

"Charley, you've got a ketchup stain on your shirt. Try some club soda."

Rubbing at his shirt, he looked around the shop.

"Derrick in today?"

"No."

"Okay, but I'll be checking around regularly. I think the old broad lives around here."

"Get out, Charley."

Grinning, he saluted, then deposited the toothpick on the counter. For occasions like Charley's visits, I keep a box of moistened Steri-wipes on hand.

Derrick just laughs when I complain about him.

Determined to protect Stella from punky predators like Charley, I wrote out a sales slip for one green scarf, $75, cash transaction. I took $75 from my wallet and put it into the cash register to cover a one-time aberration. I owed her that.

When she came in the next day, she smiled at me with the warmth formerly shown to headwaiters and doormen in her movies. I believed that Stella knew that I had done her a service.

"And what is your name, my dear?" she asked in a voice only slightly huskier than in her screen roles.

"Vera, Miss Stanley," I answered in a little-girl voice.

"Ah, you're a fan." She smiled. "And if you're a real sweetie, I'll give you my autograph before I leave."

"S-super," I stammered, exhuming the word from my teenage lexicon.

"Now, I'll just toddle over to the racks and see what other lovely fashion knockoffs you have."

"S-swell. I'll be glad to help you."

"Oh, no, sweetie, that's not necessary. Trying on clothes is such a

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private thing, except when one has one's dresser with her. And I, alas, do not."

Dismissing my help with a wave, she advanced on three-inch heels toward the Size 6 rack. Most likely, I thought, she doesn't want anyone to see a body not as taut as it used to be. Since no one else had arrived at the store, I enjoyed watching her for a while fingering the selections and draping three dresses over her arm until she sent me a look worthy of her annoyance with her maid in *Rich Girl, Sad Girl.* Embarrassed, I turned away.

Fortunately, Eunice McGovern, a good customer, came into the store looking for mauve sling-back shoes and gloves. I busied myself with her, going into the back room for her size. While I was ringing up the sale, Stella breezed by, blew me a kiss, and said, "Next time I'll give you the autograph. Sorry I didn't find anything today."

But she did. As I watched her leave the shop, I noticed a periwinkle fabric that had slipped past the flowered print skirt of the dress she was wearing. Miss Stanley hadn't wanted me in the dressing room because she had put her own dress over one of ours.

"Oh, goodness," sighed Eunice. "That was Stella Stanley. I loved her pictures. I'm so glad she said she'd be back. I'll have to tell my bridge club."

After Eunice left, I went to the rack and saw that the periwinkle silk sheath was missing. Price tag: $745. I didn't have that in my purse.

Dejectedly, I waited on more customers until a very plain woman in her fifties, dressed in a brown polyester pant suit, came in and followed me around the store. Not at all in the mood to cater to someone who obviously needed a major fashion makeover, I snapped, "I'm very busy right now."

"I'd just like a word with you, please. Somewhere private."

She moved toward the door marked Employees and I followed, certain that she was police and that she knew about the green scarf. I was going to be arrested for aiding and abetting a crime. Charley Sutton, I thought, had watched the whole episode. He had probably drilled a spy hole in the wall of the next-door coffee shop so he could truck more garbage to the tabloids. By the time we reached my office, I was ready to hold out my wrists to be cuffed.

"Sorry about the cloak-and-dagger stuff." She smiled, extending her hand. "I'm Brenda Miles, Stella Stanley's Girl Friday, Saturday, Sunday, et cetera. I noticed a new green scarf on her bureau last night with the tag from your store. Tell me, did Miss Stanley pay for it?"

"No, she didn't."

Ever the fan and not revealing the star's latest acquisition of the silk dress, I offered, "Perhaps an oversight?"

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"Hardly. Stella has a shoplifting problem. Although she's had treatment, she can't give it up completely. She has latent periods, but I suspected there'd be a flare-up after we moved into our new place and I saw your shop."

"The poor woman. I suspected kleptomania."

Brenda brushed a limp strand of hair from her eyes. "Either that or a deep-rooted sense of entitlement. For so many years, husbands or studios or the designers she publicized picked up the tabs. Now they're gone and she tries to delude herself into thinking she still deserves star privileges."

"That's so sad."

"Sad also for you. I try to go shopping with her, but yesterday and this morning I was too busy with the new place. The best I can do is track down the items and pay. You paid for the scarf, right?"

"Yes."

"And she lifted something else even more expensive today, right? Something you can't afford to pay for?"

"Yes. I've been trying to think what to do."

"Thanks for not going to the police. Just call me if it ever happens again."

After writing a check to me for the scarf and one to the store for the dress, she handed me a card with her new number penciled in.

To take my mind off the sad plight of Stella Stanley, I plugged in the vacuum. A tap on my shoulder sent a shiver down my spine. When I turned around, I saw Eunice McGovern and Muriel Harvey, another of our regulars.

"Sorry if I scared you," Eunice twittered, "but I told Muriel about seeing Stella Stanley here and we're dying to know if she comes in regularly at any set time so that we can discreetly arrange to be here."

"No, she doesn't."

Muriel set her still-pretty face into a pout. "Oh, fudge. Well, then maybe you could call either Eunice or me when she does come in and we could rush right over, after we call the rest of the bridge club, of course."

"Sorry."

I believe "withering" aptly describes the looks they gave me as they flounced out of the store. So properly withered was I that I flipped the Closed sign on the door and headed toward my office for an aspirin and a bit of a rest. Stella Stanley had entered my life not as a fading star but as a flaming meteorite that was pocking my landscape. Because of her, Charley Sutton would be lurking, as would Eunice, Muriel, and the others in the bridge club.

Someone will surely spot the shoplifting, and I can't let that happen to Stella, I thought. What a movie: me, Vera Lyons, star-

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ring in *The Rock and the Hard Place Boutique!* If I fend off Charley, I might find myself in *The Dis List,* as "Boutique Manager, V.L., high-wired on espresso from Le Café, insults noted local journalist." If I don't alert the bridge club about Stella's visits, I might lose thousands of dollars in sales. And the worst choice of all, if I tell Stella Stanley that I know her secret and refuse to allow her in the shop, I might destroy her fragile ego.

I put my head down on my desk and within minutes my headache was gone and I had the solution! No, I didn't hear tinkling from Jimmy Stewart's angel, Clarence. I'm sure my husband George had sent me an inspiration. We've always been on the same wavelength, although it's quite a bit longer now. I'm going to arrange a Stella Stanley night. She can model the fashions she loves for my regulars, by invitation only, along with wine, hors d'oeuvres, and autograph signing. Once again, Stella will be a star, and I will let her choose any outfit she wants as her fee. My plan will even make an honest man of Charley Sutton. I'll invite him to cover the event for the newspaper. And Eunice, Muriel, and the bridge club can spend time with the star and get autographs.

"Thank you, George," I sighed, and immediately called Brenda Miles, who loved the idea and knew Stella would, too.

Even the arrival of Derrick, bellowing about the Closed sign on the shop door and my coolness to his buddy Charley, didn't dampen my enthusiasm.

"I closed the shop for ten minutes to do some marketing, Derrick."

"Marketing," he sneered. "What do you know about marketing?"

"Enough to bring us in lots of money."

That got his attention.

Slowly he warmed up to the idea of a fashion show with coverage by Charley and narration by me. I should have stopped there, but giddy with success, I made a proposal to seal the deal that was definitely not inspired by my late husband.

"And, Derrick, many fashion shows feature a male escort for the model. Someone young and attractive," I mentioned coyly.

He blushed and looked almost likable. After studying him for a few seconds, I decided he was attractive in a punk-rocker sort of way.

"I was thinking of you, Derrick, but you most likely wouldn't want to walk down the runway—which needs to be built, by the way—with an old movie star, even though Charley would insist on taking pictures, which might even be carried nationally in one of those entertainment papers you always read."

He didn't answer immediately; he must have needed time to visualize himself smiling out at supermarket shoppers everywhere. Cracking his knuckles to signal the arrival of a decision, he said, "I'll do it."

We set the date for the show for the Tuesday before Christmas, a

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month and a half away, when our clientele would be in a holiday mood for buying. I handled the invitations and chair rentals and Derrick ordered the construction of a portable runway and a renovation of the dressing room. He even hired the most expensive caterer in town to prepare the hors d'oeuvres and select suitable wines.

"This is going to be a classy operation," he beamed. "And it's going to be the real deal. I've been renting Stella Stanley videos and taping those dentist-office old-time songs for background music for the show. I'm ordering a tux like the one Cary Nelson wore in that high-society flick. And my hair stylist is going to give me an authentic 'forties Hollywood do."

Delighted with Derrick's enthusiasm, I couldn't say no when he told me he had invited Charley to sit in on the preparations. After all, it's Derrick's shop.

"Charley wants to do a whole spread for *Flash, USA,* the paper that goes all over the country," he said. "He wants to chronicle the great event from start to finish. And he'll take pictures the night of the show."

"Okay, but he has to stay out of the way."

"He will. He's just going to be taking notes for the article."

I had a bad feeling about the Charley situation, especially about sending the article to *Flash, USA,* a notorious tabloid. When Charley came in, I mentioned my concern about that paper. He smiled, ran his hand through his newly shampooed hair, and oozed smarmy charm to reassure me.

"You're looking lovely today, Vera, and may I put your fears to rest? Derrick must not have told you, but I will be sending the article to *The Lamplighter,* that snobby arts weekly."

I was so relieved I offered to buy him an espresso.

When Stella arrived with Brenda after-hours to choose dresses and accessories for the show, Charley took the hand she offered for a handshake during their introduction and kissed it.

"What an honor to be in the same company as a star of your magnitude!" simpered Charley.

"Oh, my dear, how gallant of you," Stella answered. "Tell me, which of my films was your favorite?"

"Well, um, that's hard to say," Charley stammered. "So many good ones."

Adept at rescuing little white liars, Brenda said, "Come now, Stella. We've got work to do," and gently ushered her toward the dressing room.

Before the door closed, Stella blew Charley a kiss. "Please stay, dear boy. As a connoisseur of my films and a reporter for *The Lamplighter,* I'm sure you'll love the previews of these outfits I'll be modeling."

Charley grinned and settled back into the catbird seat, where he

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stayed throughout Stella's "rehearsals," offering opinions on jewelry, hats, and gloves, as well as jotting down notes for his article. The "dear boy" almost displaced Brenda as Stella's dresser. An inveterate flirt, Stella requested his help with zippers, clasps, buckles, and snaps before entering the dressing room. She was cool to Derrick, however, in their two pre-show meetings. Because of his lack of deference to her, he never achieved "dear boy" status, but nevertheless he reveled in his role as escort to the star.

To prepare for the color newspaper spread, he went to the tanning salon. To slash his waist to swashbuckler's fighting trim, he joined a gym. For the smile that would dazzle millions of readers and ultimately lead to a film career, he pressed whitening strips to his teeth. To achieve perfect modeling posture, I suspect that he paraded in his condo with the shop's missing Yellow Pages phone book on his head.

On the night of the fashion show it was only fitting that he and the other star arrive in a white limo and walk on the red carpet set on the sidewalk past two strategically placed strobe lights as Charley clicked madly on his camera. Derrick had justified the expense beforehand by reminding me that our shop's motto was "Make an Entrance."

Dressed in a shimmering gold-sequined sheath, her blond hair in a vintage upsweep, Stella strode into the boutique on gold sandals with three-inch heels to the cheers and applause of the forty invited guests. Radiant, she paused for a minute before walking up the ramp to model the dress. Before I started my narration, I saw Brenda peeping out of the dressing room, and a tear—I know it was a happy tear—slid down her cheek. After describing the dress, I motioned for Derrick to move away from Stella. Showing off his beautiful smile, Derrick mugged for the audience on both sides of the runway until Stella firmly lifted his hand from her arm and did several pirouettes to display the dress and her still-beautiful legs. Stella insisted that Derrick sit the next eight outfits out.

"The tuxedo does not go with these scenes, darling, but you'll be in the finale."

The lights dimmed and Eunice's husband, who had generously offered to put together a slide show, flashed a slide of Stella wearing a dress similar to the one she modeled next in the film *Table for Three.* I handed the mike to Stella, who quoted her lines from the movie. "Reginald, Reginald, I implore you," she breathed, "believe me. I had only one drink with Philip as I was waiting for you. It's you I love, you, only you."

"We love you, too, Stella," yelled Muriel's husband.

Stella dimpled and blew him a kiss. The audience applauded loudly as she kicked up her heels and sprinted into the dressing room. "*Oohs* and *aahs*" greeted each outfit, and appreciative mur-

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murs accompanied the slides and Stella's reenactments. I heard comments like, "Mark and I saw that picture on our first date," and, "Lord, going to the movies was the only thing that kept me sane when my brother and cousin were fighting in the South Pacific." I noticed couples holding hands and widows lost in reverie. I felt George's presence intensely, and I told him that I didn't care if the shop lost money on this evening, if no one bought a single thing. For a short time, our Stella Stanley Night brought back youth, with its dreams and heartaches, for the guests—and for the star.

Stella didn't simply wear the clothes; she emoted them. Wrapped in a faux ermine coat like the one she wore in *Viva Les Showgirls,* she clutched the belt as if she needed something to hold on to when my narration referred to Jasper Carrington's refusal to divorce his society wife. "No, Jasper, no," she gasped and staggered on the runway, before recovering with a mischievous grin and showing off the coat.

In the tidy little business suit with the fur collar, she paced impatiently as if awaiting a verdict, as she did in *Scandal in Soho.* As a fearless reporter she dodged bullets and daggers to bring to light a conspiracy to defraud investors. "And in high heels, too," she ad-libbed to the delight of the audience. Her sense of humor also sparkled when she wore the long off-white, candlelight-satin dress with the hand-sewn beaded jacket. Although she had never worn anything like it in a movie, she had insisted on modeling it. Since I knew the dress would make a striking finale to any show, I agreed.

"It will fit with the theme," Brenda assured me. "It's a role she's played often. You'll see. They'll love it."

And they did.

After strolling sedately down the runway, her arm draped in Derrick's, Stella took the mike from me before I could describe the dress.

"And this, dear ladies and gentlemen," she announced, "is the perfect dress for the mother of the bride."

She whirled around.

"Or for the bride herself, the second or third time. I believe I wore this type of dress when I married Harold, my second. Or was it Lawrence, my third? Or will I wear it for Charley, my fourth?"

She winked and everyone laughed, except Charley, who clicked away.

She whirled around again, then stood on tiptoes, and planted a kiss on Derrick's cheek. "Or will it be worn for Derrick, my fifth?"

Derrick gulped audibly before backing away.

"Not to worry, silly boy. Now just go sit in the audience with all those jealous men that I'll kiss later. Stella has a big surprise for everyone."

Delighted, the men whistled and the women applauded.

I shrugged and looked over at Eunice's husband, who had

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turned off the slide projector. He shrugged back. Brenda came out of the dressing room and handed me a note.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I announced, "Miss Stanley is going to model one of the costumes she actually wore in a movie. It's from one of her finest, most moving, most dramatic roles, as Anna in *Innocence Denied.* Ken Keefer, the motion-picture critic for *National News,* dubbed it 'Oscar-worthy,' but alas, Oscar went to another. Tonight, you can judge for yourself if she was robbed."

Slowly the dressing-room door opened and Stella shuffled out. She was wearing a black-and-white-striped prison costume. Head down, she transformed the runway into the last mile. When she reached the end of it, she lifted her head, thrust out her chin, raised her fist, and shouted, "As God is my witness, I am innocent of this murder and I should not be going to the electric chair . . ." and continued to deliver an impassioned monologue from the film.

She was superb. Many of the women wept and some men dabbed at their eyes. After a full minute's silence, the shop erupted into thunderous applause. Shouts of, "You get my vote, Stella," and, "That Academy of Something-or-Other was crazy not to give you the Oscar," and, "We love you, Stella."

She curtsied and accepted the bouquet from Brenda that Derrick was supposed to present. He sat frozen to his chair. Before returning to the dressing room, she hushed the audience. "I have a message for all of you, something from the heart that says how I feel about you. It was given to me by the film crew of *Innocence."*

She reached down into her shirt and pulled out a small placard on a chain that read "Prisoner of Love." Laughter rippled through the shop, followed by more appreciative applause. During the long ovation that followed, Stella shed many, many years, as did her audience. Finally, she took a deep breath, blew one final kiss, and trotted to the dressing room.

For a few moments I basked in the afterglow of Stella's triumphant performance and my role in initiating it—until Derrick, the consummate spell-breaker, poked my shoulder.

"You'd better get those cards and pass them out," he ordered, "before the geezers get too trashed on the free booze and forget the reason they came here."

For Derrick, the reason being, of course, to sell merchandise. Obediently, I resumed my role as shopgirl and passed out the cards that listed the twelve outfits and their prices. The Muses of Commerce went to work.

"Oh, I must have that adorable magenta sheath, Bucky. It's only nine hundred and ninety-five dollars."

"You'd look terrific in that shiny silver number, Gloria, like my personal mermaid. Let me buy it for you."

"Jimmy, I will simply sulk for weeks if I don't have that wedding

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dress Stella wore."

"Not thinking about getting married again, are you, sweetheart?" quipped Jimmy as he pulled out his checkbook and averted a prolonged pout.

The sound of ballpoint pens clicking didn't satisfy Derrick. Grimly he surveyed the room, then charged over to me.

"Where the hell is Charley?" he demanded.

"I guess he left."

"What a jerk. Look around. There's more money to be made."

As soon as Stella came into the room, all kinds of cameras immortalized her entrance. Swarming toward her, the guests became instant paparazzi. Usually reserved clients were shouting, "Over here, Miss Stanley, be in a picture with Herbert and me," and, "How about one with our bridge club?" Graciously, she fulfilled every photo request.

Ungraciously, Derrick muttered, "We could have made some big bucks if Charley had stayed around to take pictures. Charged a hundred dollars a shot. These fans would have paid that much or more."

Although not a fan of Charley's, I offered an excuse to get rid of Derrick. "He's a journalist with a national audience now. He must have a deadline."

Brightening, Derrick straightened his shoulders and his bow tie. "Hey, you're right. *Flash, USA* comes out on Thursday. It'll have my picture all over it. I'll have to tell Trish down at the News Nook to save me at least ten copies."

I corrected him. "Not *Flash, USA,* Derrick, he's doing the spread for *Lamplighter,* the newspaper of the arts."

"You must have heard him wrong, Vera." He grinned.

Speechless, I watched as he resumed working the room, looking over shoulders to tally up the sales. I rushed to my office to connect with my late husband George. When I lifted his picture from my desk, I shivered, which is not my usual reaction to his treasured face. Slowly, I put the picture down.

"George, you are not reassuring tonight."

Chilled, I wrapped an old shawl around me and probed my discomfort. Okay, so Charley lied to me about his assignment from *The Lamplighter.* Maybe he thought that Stella would refuse to allow him to photograph the before-and-after of the show for *Flash, USA,* the tabloid that had reported her shoplifting arrest years ago and had thoroughly humiliated her during her third divorce by publishing photos leaked by a legal secretary of Stella with eye blackened and nose swollen.

But—and this was a very improbable but—the tabloid might want to atone for its past sins by displaying a radiant Stella at the boutique. Of course, attributing a conscience to *Flash, USA* was

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like claiming that Dracula's altruistic acts saved his victims from the disgusting practice of bloodletting by leeches.

But—and I thought this was a better probability than the first but—there was no way that *Flash, USA* and Charley could distort the actuality of the rehearsals and the fashion show, which showed Stella at her best. Although Stella had never sued about the earlier photos, perhaps a deluge of other lawsuits was making *Flash, USA* clean up its act.

Cheered, I went back to the party. Cameras were still flashing. Brenda hovered over Stella, offering her mineral water, trying to lead her to a chair, advising her to rest a bit, and being shooed away by her boss, who had burst through the cocoon of age and was thoroughly enjoying her recovered youth. At midnight, no pumpkin arrived. It was well after two when Brenda led her to the car, followed by a mob of adoring fans. Stella gave a regal wave, then covered an unqueenly yawn.

Thrilled by the success of the evening, I stood outside accepting the praise and thank-yous of the shop's clientele.

"Promise you'll have another Stella Stanley Night, Vera," implored Eunice.

"Yes, do, do," echoed the bridge club.

"Perhaps when the spring collection comes in," I answered.

"Wonderful." Eunice smiled. "Start planning now."

And plan I did, all the next day, flipping through catalogs—visualizing Stella in a flared lavender organdy garden-party dress; Stella in turquoise sundress and lacy stole; Stella in wide-brimmed straw hat; Stella in long seersucker bathrobe trimmed with white satin. Visualizing Stella in the bathrobe reminded me of last night when Brenda tucked her into the car. Perhaps the show was too much for her. Nearly eighty years old, she literally performed for six straight hours, a feat daunting even to a much younger person. At one-thirty, I called her house.

"She's asleep," Brenda said. "She might sleep all day, but that's okay, and we'll spend all night reliving that beautiful show. Thanks, Vera."

Since Brenda sounded tired herself, I didn't mention the possibility of a sequel, a word that gave me pause. Like any successful producer, I feared the jinx of the sequel.

I needn't have worried. There will be no sequel. *Flash, USA* saw to that.

On Thursday, Derrick bounded into the shop, a stack of newspapers under his arm.

"Keep the phone lines open, Vera. Hollywood agents will be calling any time now after they see my face and bod plastered all over *Flash, USA.*"

My heart sank as Narcissus thumped the tabloids down on the

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counter and moistened his fingers to hasten their arrival at the middle spread. What he saw did not please him. In fact, what he saw enraged him, and I can't repeat the words he shrieked. They were directed at Charley.

In the montage of eight pictures, Derrick appeared only once, a shot of him on the runway being kissed by Stella, the back of her head almost completely obscuring his face. As Derrick raved about "double-crossing," I held my breath, hoping desperately to see tasteful pictures of Stella, but when Derrick moved his arm away, I saw Stella not in ageless glory, but in a most pitiful state.

Under the headline "To Catch a Falling Star," *Flash, USA* had assembled seven pictures of Stella dressed only in a slip, furtively concealing items. The only photo showing her fully clothed and not shoplifting was the one of her kissing Derrick. Its caption read, "Still on the prowl for young men."

The single paragraph of text under the headline explained the other photos as "gotchas"—Stella caught in the act of stealing from a friend.

Derrick stormed out of the store, vowing to dismantle Charley limb by limb. Too upset to join him in the dismembering, I forced myself to study the photos. Had Charley, I wondered, equipped his camera with a zoom lens and taken them outside Stella's home? If so, why was Stella concealing her own things? That made no sense.

Heartsick and perplexed, I stared at the photos and noticed in all of them a familiar Spanish vase with trailing ivy on the wall of the room in front of Stella. And then I knew—the photos came from our dressing room. They were taken during the rehearsals for the show, but not by Charley, who during that time innocently focused his camera on Stella only when she practiced modeling on the runway. I rushed into the dressing room and immediately found the hidden camera above the vase. And I remembered Derrick insisting that the dressing room be renovated for the star. Charley knew about Stella's shoplifting habit and enlisted Derrick's aid to record her weakness. He believed she couldn't resist taking things when no one was looking.

But someone was looking. Brenda was in the dressing room with her at all times, acting as her dresser. I never saw her leave. And there was nothing missing from the shop. Were the pictures staged, and if so, how? My head was spinning. I picked up the paper to try to make sense of it.

The pictures showed Stella in varying attempts at theft: tying elbow-length gloves around her thigh; clipping a rhinestone necklace onto the strap of her slip; hanging a feathery boa on a hook and covering it with her own jacket; slipping a lamé turban into an umbrella propped against the wall; tucking a pearl-studded evening bag into her black clutch bag; sliding gold hoop earrings

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onto her ring finger; and clipping a sunburst brooch inside her own hat. But all those items made it into the show and most were purchased. There had to be a solution and it had to be in the pictures.

I took a magnifying glass from my desk and scrutinized each one, stopping at the earrings. A vague outline of another hand appeared in back of Stella's arm. Brenda's! After the faithful Girl Friday replaced the clothes from the show on hangers, the star was trying to steal the accessories. Undeceived, Brenda had retrieved them and returned them with the outfits. How Charley must have despaired about the possibility of his hidden camera scheme being thwarted by Brenda's presence! But when he saw the first two films and realized Stella was still shoplifting and trying to hide her attempts from Brenda, he must have rejoiced to realize he simply had to crop out Brenda's taking back the items.

With dread, I punched in Stella's number. I had to warn Brenda that the pictures were in *Flash, USA.* It was too late. After a night of rehashing the show, Stella asked Brenda to get *The Lamplighter* and made her promise that they would look at it together. When nothing about the show appeared in that paper, Brenda believed the spread would appear the following week. Disappointed but handling it well, Stella went to the front door to bring in the local paper, thinking something might be in there. *Flash, USA* was propped against the door with a note to open the paper to the center spread. I'm sure Charley hand-delivered it to her door.

"I'm waiting for the doctor," Brenda said. "Stella's in shock. She just sits on the floor hugging herself and rocking. How could you have done this to her?"

"I didn't know about the hidden camera, Brenda. Honestly. I'd never hurt her. Derrick and Charley planned this horror together."

"It's a horror all right," she answered and ended the call.

As I did at many of Stella's movies, I started to cry, and only stopped when Charley burst in screaming that Derrick had slashed his tires and broken his windshield, demanding to know where "the creep" was hiding. I beat him into the dressing room, ripped out the camera, and threw it at him. I missed him, but scored a direct hit on Derrick's forehead as he was charging through the front door. A brawl ensued between the two conspirators. I called the police, who were quite busy that day handling phone calls from my irate fashion-show guests. An avid reader of *Flash, USA,* Eunice saw the pictures and recognized the vase in the dressing room. Her husband and other husbands believed that their wives were being photographed while changing in the dressing room, frequently trying on the shop's undergarments, and would be blackmailed.

They were right. Charley had a pile of photos to supplement his income from the tabloid. Derrick was hauled in on invasion of privacy issues because Charley fingered him as authorizing the

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installation of the camera. No charges were brought against Stella for shoplifting after Brenda explained putting the items back and I confirmed her story. *Flash, USA* is issuing an apology. Derrick is facing a barrage of lawsuits, which will effectively put Be a Star out of business and me out of a job, but I don't care. I've got another job to do.

Flash, USA is sputtering out explanations about Charley's lying to them about the location of the photos. Charley told them he had gotten a tip from one of Stella's rich friends about her habit and she'd allowed him to take zoom photos of her stealing jewelry from the hostess's bedroom. When I had read the statement in *Flash, USA* about Stella stealing from a friend, I thought it was a reference to me.

Brenda apologized to me for thinking I had anything to do with the photos. The following week, we had a glass of wine together after Stella fell asleep. The lateness of the hour and the warmth of the wine called for confidences.

"I'm going to tell you something that nobody else knows," Brenda said. "Stella is my stepmother. I was part of the package when she married my father, her second. I was ten years old and so homely and awkward that my real mother, also a movie star, didn't want me. Stella told me I was beautiful and would always be with her. After the divorce, I went with Stella and she gave me a good life. Lots of warmth, excitement, glamour. I love her and I will always try to protect her."

We both cried, me for the poignancy of the story and Brenda for failing to shelter Stella from Charley and Derrick. When we heard Stella moving about upstairs, we quickly dried our tears. I shooed Brenda to bed. It was my turn to comfort Stella as best as I could.

Holding on to the stair rail and refusing help, she slowly descended, graceful and stoic in her prison stripes. Since her appearance in *Flash, USA,* Stella refused to wear anything but her costume from *Innocence Denied.* When she reached the next to last step, she recited her lines from the ending of the film. "As God is my witness, I am innocent," she cried. Then, as she has done so many times since she saw those awful photos, she plunged into my arms.

"You won't let them put me in the electric chair, will you?" she sobbed.

I stroked her hair. "No, Stella. Brenda and I won't let them do it."

That assurance soothes her for almost ten minutes until she repeats it as if performing a retake on the old studio lot. I'm going to stay here until Stella recovers. Brenda needs me to spell her during the long nightly replays of *Innocence Denied.* However long it takes, one of us will be here at the foot of the stairs to catch a falling star. ●

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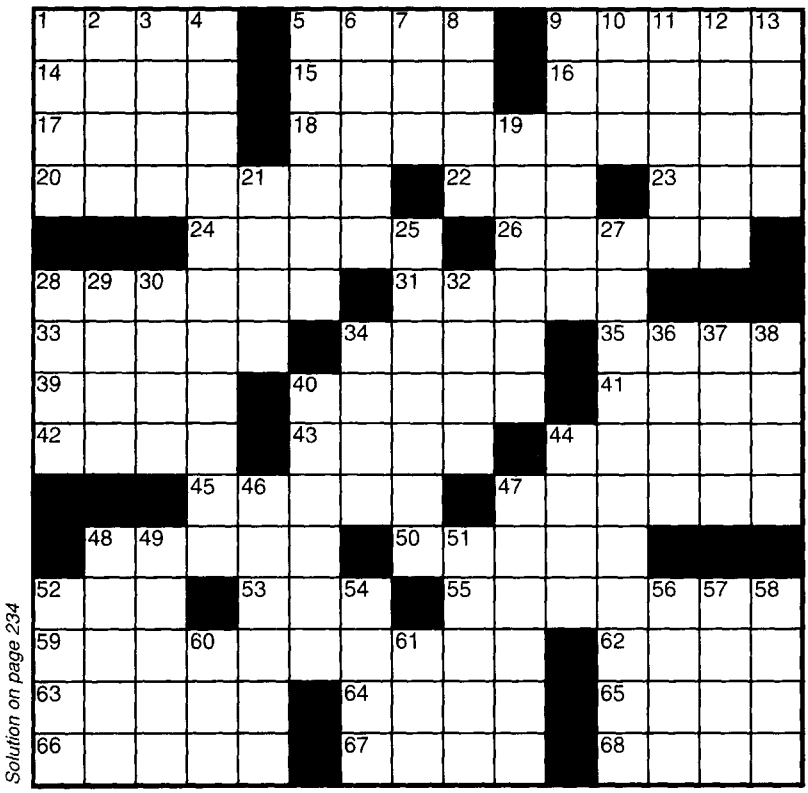
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

Fatal Infinitive

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 234

ACROSS

1. Ms. Paretsky
5. _____ *for Me,* John MacDonald
9. Draw new boundaries
14. Muslim ruler
15. Leon, Hollywood's favorite "dear old dad"
16. Fred's sister
17. "Am _____ a fly like thee?" William Blake, "The Fly
18. In line? (James Patterson)
20. Sgt. Friday solved the cases
22. Dram
23. Ms. Granger, creator of Chief Inspector Alan Markby

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24. Stringent
26. *Death at the* _____, Janet Laurence
28. Approvals
31. Hersey town
33. What Ms. Hutchings does
34. Indigo
35. Final notice
39. Precedes dynamics
40. Alpaca's habitat
41. Amanda Cross's sleuth Fansler
42. It could be dastardly
43. Young horse
44. Passover meal
45. To Sherlock, "the woman"
47. Contemporary
48. Sourdough, for one
50. 3 Down's *Cat on the* _____
52. *The* _____ *West Murder Case,* George Baxt
53. Gear
55. Rings of color
59. When is it? (Hilda Lawrence)
62. Earl Biggers's middle name
63. "They kept the noiseless _____ of their way," Gray's "Elegy"
64. Death to Gordianus
65. "_____ the jaws of Death . . . Rode the six hundred," Tennyson
66. Curves
67. Inclination
68. Summers abroad

DOWN

1. E-mail
2. Latin for 58 Down
3. Sneaky's co-author
4. Is there one? (Rex Stout)
5. Thin cookies
6. Discharges
7. Always (poet.)
8. Attention-getter
9. Some porch furniture
10. Tokyo, formerly
11. Decoration
12. Dress style
13. Part of a hammer
19. Sums
21. Bay of Panama island
25. Some murder weapons have them
27. Scheduled? (John Dunning)
28. _____ *in the Water,* Julie Smith
29. Thought in Tours
30. Weary
32. Fare
34. Presently
36. Ordered
37. Falco's journey
38. Shore bird
40. Made a perfect score
44. Unit of sound
46. Gardeners, at times
47. Least
48. Infamous motel
49. Checks
51. Terrier group
52. Follows play or soul
54. *The* _____ *of Ligeia,* starring Vincent Price (1964)
56. Fast time
57. Commedia dell'_____
58. Greek for 2 Down
60. A Stooge
61. Bambi's mother

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Art by Laurie Harden

SUNSET CITY

by Martin Edwards

She must have known.

"I'm not accusing you of anything," Alix said. She opened her eyes very wide. It was a favourite trick. Simple, sure, but she never ceased to be surprised how often it worked.

In the distance, sea gulls were keening. The sun was still high, but there was a sharp edge to the breeze and Alix was glad she'd kept on her suede jacket. It wasn't exactly beachwear, but she never trusted the British weather, least of all at the British seaside. If you could call this Britain? She didn't know the island's technical status; that sort of trivia held no appeal for her.

Jayne Ive folded her arms. She was standing on the step outside her bungalow, a compact middle-aged woman, neatly dressed in a lime-green trouser suit. Alix, a relentless optimist, thought it a good sign that Jayne hadn't slammed the door in her face. Behind her, Alix could see a hallway with framed prints of moody sunsets on the wall. This could be Mrs. Anyone of Anywhere. But it wasn't.

"You say that as though you're doing me a favour." Jayne's voice was pleasingly husky, Alix decided. Firmness tinged with irony.

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This was no downtrodden woman, scarcely a natural victim. She would sound good on the box. "Taking my part when everyone else is against me."

Alix smiled and said, "Well, it's not so far off the truth, is it?"

"I have all the help I need, thanks. And, you might like to bear in mind, I have a good lawyer, too."

The bungalow stood on the cliffs, looking out over the bay and beyond to the Irish Sea. Alix glanced at the sandstone buildings spreading out below, towards the ruined castle on St. Patrick's Isle. The little island was linked to the larger by a short causeway. A pretty enough place, this, but hardly a centre of metropolitan sophistication.

"Really? The sole Manx specialist in the law on defamation of character?"

As soon as the words left her lips, she regretted them. She hadn't liked the hint of legal action. Court proceedings, injunctions, they could snarl up any programming schedule; sometimes they killed a project stone-dead. But she knew better than to allow herself to be provoked and she'd intended no more than a flip aside. Yet it sounded as though she were mocking both Jayne Ive and her island home. A bad mistake. It would be crazy to antagonise the woman she'd travelled so far to see.

"He's a partner in a big firm in Merseyside, actually," Jayne said drily. "Don't worry, I'm not entirely parochial. I did live in Liverpool for ten years, remember."

Alix had been raised in Sydney and resident for the past eighteen months in Battersea. To her, Liverpool was parochial enough, but she didn't push it. Jayne Ive came from a different world, a world Alix, too, would need to inhabit if this programme were ever to be made.

"After the trial, though, you came back to your roots. Back to the Isle of Man."

"There's a saying round these parts. A Manx girl who marries a man from the mainland will bring him back to the island one day. William and I spent all our wedded life in Liverpool." Jayne unfolded her arms and brushed a lock of fading fair hair out of her

Martin Edwards's very first book in the lawyer Harry Devlin series, long in print in England, has finally been published in the U.S. by Five Star Press. The book is entitled *All the Lonely People*. Mr. Edwards has recently edited the British CWA's Golden Jubilee anthology *Mysterious Pleasures*, and his own nonfiction book about crime investigation, *Urge to Kill*, has just come out in the U.S., from Writer's Digest Books. ✝

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eyes. "But I tell you this: One day, he'll come back to join us, Rosie and me."

There was a catch in her voice, making Alix wonder if at last she might be ready to crack. Time to be gentle. Tea and sympathy?

"Do you think—we could sit down, have a quiet chat?"

Jayne frowned. She was about to say no, Alix was sure of it, when her expression changed. She was looking over Alix's shoulder and an anxious look came into her eyes.

Alix turned her head and saw a young woman approaching, her flat heels crunching the gravel of the unmade road. Tall, overweight, with a blotchy complexion. The loose grey top was fair enough, but the flowery leggings definitely a mistake. Her dark hair was inexpertly cropped, tufts of it sticking out at odd angles, as if she'd let an old mariner down by the harbour do his worst with a blunt knife.

"This is Rosie?"

She was guessing. The studio possessed no file pictures of William and Jayne Ive's only child. But the age was about right. Nineteen, twenty? She bore no obvious resemblance to her mother, but her father, now, that was a different matter. The lumbering gait and the widely spaced blue eyes were spookily familiar from photographs and TV clips of William Ive attending court.

"Yes, it is," Jayne said.

As she drew near, Rosie Ive focused her gaze on Alix. She glanced quizzically at her mother, as if to say, *Why are you, you of all people, talking to a stranger?*

"We can talk, if you like," Jayne said hurriedly. "Just for a little while."

Alix nodded. She always liked getting her own way, but she didn't want to show how pleased she felt. "Fine."

Jayne made no attempt to usher her guest inside or to effect introductions. Instead, she stood her ground and spoke to her daughter.

"I'm going out for a little while. We're going to have a cup of tea down at the front. I won't be more than an hour, promise."

Rosie shrugged and said nothing. She walked straight past them into the house and pulled the door closed behind her.

"Come on, then," Jayne said, waving in the direction of the seafront.

"I do appreciate this, Mrs. Ive." Alix concentrated on investing her tone with the maximum sincerity. "Or Jayne—if I may."

"Call me what you like," Jayne said with a shrug. "I mean what I say, mind. An hour, maximum."

Alix inhaled the salty air. "Wonderful. This really is good of you."

She fell into step beside the older woman as they moved down the hill. Jayne Ive kept up a brisk pace, as if anxious to get away

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from her home. Stretched out below was the beach. Children were playing on it with bats and balls, their parents sunbathing or eating ice creams. Fishing boats plied to and fro. Only the jagged remnants of the castle outlined against the sky testified to Peel's violent past.

"This is a lovely place," Alix said. It seemed the right thing to say and she had to admit to herself that the resort would photograph well. For her money, though, Mauritius was more like it as a holiday destination. Never mind the history, feel the heat.

"Beautiful," Jayne said, almost whispering the word. "I love it very much."

"I gather the wind blows pretty fiercely."

The bloke who had sat next to her on the plane to Ronaldsway had told her this. His name was Rupert and he wasn't a native, just a young city trader who was flying over to a branch office in Douglas to sort a few tax-efficient deals. By a happy coincidence, as he described it, they were staying at the same hotel, off the main road between Peel and Port Erin. He'd asked Alix to have dinner with him and she'd said yes. Why not?

"Man is a small island, it's a healthy place."

"Bracing, huh?" Alix said, just about resisting the temptation to say *Surely no man is an island?*

When they reached sea level, Jayne waved a hand at a cafeteria squashed between The Longboat Guest House and a tiny gift shop. Its signboard bore the name *Maisie's.* "We can talk there. It's quiet enough."

Maisie, whoever she might be, was obviously a gingham fetishist, Alix decided as they settled down at a corner table. The place smelled of fish and chips. Apart from a noisy family of six by the door, the two of them were the only customers under seventy. As for the menu, it was *very* British seaside.

"I'll have a pot of tea and a plate of bread and butter," Alix said. Her tone was mildly satiric—she just couldn't help it—but Jayne didn't seem to notice.

"Me too." Jayne waved at a fat waitress, inevitably clad in a gingham overall, and ordered for them.

"Thanks for sparing me your time," Alix said.

"I don't feel you left me with much choice."

"Don't worry. Look at me, I'm not taking notes, and I promise I'm not wired for sound. Like I said on the phone the other day, I just want to hear your side of the story."

"I haven't got a 'side of the story.' I never talked to the press, not once. You must have heard—I was offered money, big money, as it happens, but I turned them all down flat."

Alix leaned across the table, her hands almost touching Jayne's. "I respect your wish for privacy," she said earnestly.

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"Then why are you here? Why don't you take the next flight back to London?"

"Jayne, you must understand, I'm not a tabloid journalist. I'm a serious documentary maker. There's a world of difference."

"Not to me. Wherever you come from, whatever your agenda is, you all have one thing in common. You want to reopen old wounds."

"Please. It's not like that. I want to present the public with a balanced picture about the case. Something they haven't really had until now. It's been pretty much one-way traffic, don't you agree? The police have had a field day—that inspector with the squint and his blond P.R. lady. After the trial, the media hung on their every word. You kept your own counsel, from the best of motives, I'm sure. But time has passed and maybe you ought to start wondering whether silence was the best idea."

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Because tongues start wagging, that's why." Alix shook her head sadly. "I'm sorry, Jayne, but there's no point in beating about the bush. You need to get real. And the reality is that when people stop talking about your husband, they start talking about you."

"About me?" Jayne Ive looked puzzled, as if the idea had never occurred to her. A bluff, surely? No one could be that unwise to the ways of the world.

"You're married to a convicted serial killer, Jayne," Alix murmured. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to sound harsh, but it's not a conventional situation. Besides, it goes further than that. You worked side by side with him, you lived together in the home where all the deaths occurred. Face it, you can't be surprised that questions have been asked. Why didn't you figure out what your husband was doing to the residents? Did you help in a cover-up? Maybe—I won't spare you this, Jayne, we're both adults—you *knew* what was going on all the time. Trust me, that's what people were talking about."

Jayne received the little speech in silence. She didn't even blanch at the dread suggestion. *She must have known.* But then, she was bound to have gone through it all in her own head a thousand times.

The tea and bread and butter arrived. "Lovely," Alix said, and the fat waitress positively simpered.

"I'm not even supposed to talk about the case," Jayne said presently. "That's on legal advice. William's appealing against conviction, as you know."

"Lawyers." Alix raised her eyes to the heavens. "Don't they see, an appeal against a miscarriage of justice needs the oxygen of publicity?"

"Besides, some of the relatives have threatened to sue me, to claim compensation. Even though there was never any suggestion of my being charged with anything. Even though I've suffered, too.

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I've lost a loved one, but they never think of that."

"You owned the Sunny Hours Home."

"William put it in my name. It was a tax thing, I don't know the details. As for being sued, there's a lot of emotion about. A little bit of money. It affects the way some people think."

"But not you?"

Jayne's lips formed into a thin line. "Alix, my husband was given four life sentences for crimes he didn't commit. What do *you* think that I think?"

Alix tried her tea, but it scalded her tongue. The bread and butter didn't look promising, either. The things that you do in the line of duty.

"Well, that's what I'd like to discuss with you. You obviously remain convinced he was innocent."

Jayne took a deep breath. "The first time we spoke on the telephone, I told you I had no intention of pouring my heart out to you. But I still say what I've always said. William didn't kill those poor old people."

"The evidence—"

"Don't talk to me about the evidence! It wasn't worth two ha'pennies. Those so-called expert pathologists, disagreeing among themselves. Even that jury, that stupid jury, had two members who realised it didn't add up. It took the best part of a week to screw a majority verdict out of them. The judge should have called a halt long before."

Jayne's pale cheeks had reddened. It was the first time she had shown animation. Alix felt like hugging herself. The ice was well and truly broken. Jayne might say she didn't want to talk, but it was only natural that she would seize the chance of challenging the received wisdom. Maybe, just maybe, she genuinely *believed* what she was saying. Or had made herself believe it.

Suddenly Alix understood something that had eluded her until now. "You expected him to get off, didn't you? You really supposed the jury would acquit."

"That was when I had faith in British justice."

"But two of the deceased actually left legacies to you or your husband."

"It happens, in residential care homes. We cared for people, night and day. They were full of gratitude. We didn't encourage them to make us gifts. But some residents can be very persistent. They wanted to show how much they appreciated the way we looked after them, that's all."

"You have to admit the timing looked unfortunate. Both the wills were made in the fortnight before the deaths occurred. No wonder the families became suspicious."

"Only one of them, the Devaneys. Pure greed. They were the

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people who alerted the police. If it hadn't been for them, William would never even have been questioned, let alone convicted. In each case the doctors certified death as due to natural causes. As for the legacies, William and I were only ever going to get peanuts."

She was in full flow, the legal advice on *omertà* well and truly forgotten. To encourage her, Alix assumed her most fascinated expression and said, "Really?"

"Yes! You must have researched this. Fifteen hundred or two thousand at most. Don't forget, our residents weren't rich people. Most of them had spent their lives doing manual work in inner-city Liverpool, or else on the dole. The council was paying their fees because its own homes were packed out. Why would my husband kill for so little reward?"

"Because he could?" Alix sampled the bread. It was dry, and a single mouthful was enough. "So easy, you see. Old folks, come to while away their twilight hours at this home. Frail, defenceless eighty-somethings. Easily smothered. At that age, if someone dies, who makes a song and dance? Hey, death is what happens to old people. *He had a good innings,* that's what people say, isn't it? It's only to be expected. Maybe even to be welcomed. Passing away peacefully in bed, there are plenty of worse ways to go."

Jayne drained her cup. "You don't understand. It wasn't like that."

"Then what *was* it like? Don't you see, Jayne? This is your chance. You can tell your story for the first time. Explain to the world how it feels to be treated in this way."

Jayne got to her feet. "Sorry, I just don't want to carry on with this. Please go away from here. I'm not prepared to talk to you anymore."

In the bar of the swanky four-star Seascape Manor, Alix finished her vodka and tonic and said, "She's got something to hide, I'm sure of it. Maybe evidence that could wreck William's appeal if it came to light. She only talked to me to find out whether I'd discovered a clue to whatever it is she's trying to keep secret."

Rupert thrust out his lower lip. It made him look about thirteen. "Maybe she helped her old man to do in the geriatrics. So what?"

She punched him lightly on the stomach and he pretended to double up in pain.

"You don't understand. This is important to me. This could be such a great programme. What's it like, being married to a serial killer? Does it come as a terrible shock, to find out the man you've been sleeping with has committed a string of murders? Or is it really confirming what, deep down, you already suspected? All

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those little things you turned a blind eye to, the nagging doubts at last bitterly confirmed."

Rupert laughed and Alix felt his leg brushing against hers under the table. "This really turns you on, doesn't it?"

Alix unclipped her hair from the ponytail, letting it fall onto her shoulders. This evening was going to end the way most such evenings ended. More than likely she'd just lie back and think of the BAFTAs. Yeah. *Best Documentary,* it definitely had a ring to it.

"This could make such great telly," she said.

"Right," Rupert said. She could tell from the way he was looking at her that he'd talked enough about murder. "So, Ms. Alix Lawry, what else turns you on?"

Next morning, Alix lingered in bed until it was after ten. She had a hangover and didn't bother with breakfast. Peel was supposed to be famous for its kippers but the very thought of tucking into dead fish made her want to puke. Rupert left her early: He had meetings to attend and money to make. They'd have one more night together before he went home to his posh flat in Fulham and the accountant girlfriend who, he said not very convincingly, bored him rigid. Alix wouldn't be sorry to see him go: He wasn't the least selfish lover she'd ever encountered. Perhaps he might say the same about her. Whatever. They'd helped each other to wile away the time.

She wasn't sure how long she would stay on the island. The booking was for a week, but more than likely she'd know sooner than that whether a programme about the Ive case was viable. The first time they'd spoken, she'd talked about a fee for cooperation, but Jayne had said at once she wasn't interested in money. A lie, of course, for everyone was interested in money. All the same, she could understand why Jayne was sensitive. Refusing the tabloid offers to tell her story might have cost her, but it was a good move in terms of maintaining credibility. Once you sold your soul to the red-tops, you were fair game. What chance then of insisting on personal privacy? Jayne was wise to keep her options open. What Alix needed to do was to keep on at her. Everyone was persuadable. It was a question of making her understand that a serious, balanced, and fair examination of series killings from the perspective of the culprit's (sorry, alleged culprit's) wife would give her a right to answer everyone who said *she must have known.*

Alix scrambled out of bed and started getting dressed. She'd always realised it wouldn't be easy to tempt Jayne into talking. Perhaps she ought to play dirty. It was never the first option; she had professional standards, after all, and before long she would have a reputation as a serious broadcaster to protect. But it wasn't a last resort, either.

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Before leaving London, she'd done her homework. Rosie, poor Rosie, her father's final victim, had found herself a part-time job in a bookshop. Although Alix didn't have the name of the place, how many bookshops could there be in somewhere the size of Peel?

Several, as it turned out, and it was a case of fourth-time-lucky when, around lunchtime, Alix arrived at an antiquarian dealer's dusty place of business in a side street near the harbour. The front window was given over to a display of Hall Caine first editions. Whoever Hall Caine was. There were two big ground-floor rooms, crammed with books from floor to ceiling. The place reeked of mildew. In one of the rooms an old man with a flowing beard was talking to a doubtful customer about a volume of local history.

"It will tell you everything you'd like to know about that remarkable fellow Magnus Barefoot. How he built the first castle . . ."

Magnus Barefoot? For God's sake, this place was like something out of Tolkien. Alix moved away. A scruffy sign on a piece of cardboard said Upstairs to Children's, Reference, and Sport. She climbed the steps carefully, holding on to the wobbly banister. The rickety staircase was a deathtrap.

A young woman stood facing a set of shelves devoted to the likes of Enid Blyton and Captain W.E. Johns. Her ample backside wasn't flattered by today's choice of leggings, in hideous mauve. A mobile phone was clamped to her ear.

"Honest, Mum, I'm fine," she murmured soothingly. "Now, I think I heard a customer coming up. I have to go."

As Rosie switched the phone off, Alix gave a little cough. Rosie turned to look at her.

"Can I—oh, it's you!"

The interrupted offer of help was expressed wearily enough; as soon as the girl recognised Alix, her hostility was undisguised. Her heavy frame seemed to stiffen, as if in self-defence. Alix felt a small stab of pity for the girl. She was unattractive and she was branded as her father's daughter. But pity never got a television show on the screen.

"Hi. I was wondering if we could have a quick word."

"My mother told you yesterday. We just want to be left alone."

"I tried to explain to her, Rosie. This programme's going to be made, whether you and your mum cooperate or not. What I'd like is to make sure you have your say, put forward your dad's point of view. Tell the viewers how things really were in the Sunny Hours Home. After all, it was a family concern, wasn't it? Your parents ran the place and you helped to look after the wrinklies. That was the title we were thinking of, by the way. *A Family Concern.*"

Rosie's jaw was square and solid. Uncompromising. Loudly, she said, "No way. Why don't you just go back home and pester someone else? Leave us in peace."

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From downstairs, the Magnus Barefoot fan called, "Is everything all right, Rosie?"

"In case you're wondering," Rosie hissed, "he's a cousin of my mother's. He was glad to give me a job. So don't even think of threatening to tell him that I'm the daughter of William Ive. He already knows."

An afternoon spent asking around convinced Alix that Jayne Ive had made a shrewd move, returning to her native island. No wonder she hadn't needed to change her name, assume a false personality, and keep on the move, the usual fate of serial killers' spouses. Plenty of people seemed to think that William Ive might be innocent. There were hints that the relatives of the dead were Scousers on the make, that the defence pathologists might have been right after all and the aged victims had indeed died natural deaths. In the dim and distant past, Jayne Ive's long-dead parents had been well known on the island, and well regarded. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the trial, she and her daughter were widely regarded as luckless victims of one man's personal catastrophe.

"One thing puzzles me," she said to Rupert over dinner that evening. "Why bury herself away here when it's so far to visit her husband in prison?"

"Well, if she's among friends . . ."

"Sure, but she's also supposed to be the devoted little woman. Yet she hardly ever goes to see him. As for Rosie, someone told me she doesn't think the girl's visited him once since the sentence was passed. Not what you'd expect from a devoted family."

"Why worry?" he asked. "You're a programme maker, not a detective."

"I'm not sure this programme's ever going to get made," she said. "Too many bloody contradictions."

"At least you got a nice holiday out of it," he said. "A short break in Sunset City."

"Sunset City?"

"Yeah, that's what they call Peel, haven't you read the brochure in your room?"

"I seem to remember I was otherwise engaged last night. Too occupied to leaf through the literature, let alone the Bible so kindly left by the Gideons."

"Well, to you and me this may be a seaside resort, but the Manx see it differently. Something to do with the reddish hue of the sandstone everything's built of, apparently. Hence 'sunset.' And there's a ruined cathedral in the grounds of the castle. Hence a city."

"Darling, you know everything," Alix said teasingly.

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"At least, after last night, I know what you like," he said. And they spoke no more of the Ives that night.

When they drew the curtains the next morning, Alix was surprised that visibility was so poor. It wasn't September yet.

"I never knew a place like this for fog," Rupert said. He was an authority on the island's imperfections. "I tell you, this is nothing. Later in the year . . ."

She kissed him goodbye when his taxi arrived and let him promise to get in touch when she was back in London. She didn't think he'd bother. On too much of a good thing with the accountant girlfriend, probably. Oh well. Easy come, easy go.

After a leisurely continental breakfast—she still didn't fancy kippers—she caught the bus which took her back into Peel. The mist was clearing and, according to the forecast, the day was going to be bright, the temperature in the low seventies. Still not exactly Bondi, and the scarf she put on wasn't intended simply as a fashion accessory. After making her way back up onto the cliffs, she pressed the bell beside Jayne Ive's front door.

"I thought I told you not to come back." Jayne had opened the door, but kept it on the latch. Treating her like an unwelcome intruder, someone who might be wanting to ransack the house.

"Jayne, we need—"

"Listen, all I need, all Rosie and I need, is that you leave us alone. She told me that you'd been to see her while she was working. It's disgusting, the way you people harass children."

"Jayne, she's not a child, she's a grown woman. You had her working for you." A thought struck her. "Did she guess what was going on?"

The face in the crack darkened with rage. "Get away from here!"

At last, Alix thought, I've broken through her defences. No chance of cooperation now, though. So: May as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb. "What are you hiding, Jayne?"

"I'm not hiding anything! Now go and leave us alone, or I'll call the police."

She slammed the door fast and hard, before Alix had time to think up an ironic rejoinder. In frustration, Alix banged hard on the door, but all that happened was that she barked her knuckles and Jayne didn't answer.

For a minute or so, Alix stood outside the bungalow, swearing quietly to herself. She'd messed up, there was no denying it. She hadn't handled Jayne Ive well, and without her input, she didn't have nearly enough material to persuade the powers that be to make a fifty-minute programme about what it's like being married to a serial killer.

Could she put a different spin on her original idea? Her old boss

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back in Sydney had told her that was the secret of all the successful programme makers. As she trudged back along the unmade road, she juggled the possibilities in her mind.

The mist had vanished, leaving the skies bright and clear. Slowly, too, the fog in Alix's head was beginning to disperse. What if Rupert had been half right? *Maybe she helped her old man to do in the geriatrics*—that was what he had said. What if William Ive had, indeed, been innocent? What if Jayne were responsible for all the crimes?

She quickened her pace. It made a kind of sense, if Jayne were the killer. The forensic evidence in the case hadn't been up to much. The Devaneys had focused their attention on William Ive, since he had been named in their late mother's will; maybe when the postmortems had revealed something untoward, the police had taken the easy option. For all anyone knew, William might even have connived in taking the heat off his wife. By all accounts, they were a devoted couple.

Maybe this programme would turn into a detective story. A quest for truth that ended up with the unmasking of an unexpected culprit. Terrific. But how to pin the crimes on a woman who had, as she'd already pointed out, never been charged with anything?

She could see people scrambling over the grassy mound inside the castle walls. The sun was bright on the sandstone of the little houses crammed between St. Patrick's Isle and the quayside. Sunset City, yes, the nickname made a kind of sense.

Rosie. She was the weak link, Alix was sure of it. Time for another chat.

In the bookshop, the bearded man was extolling a book about Viking burial customs to a wizened little chap in a tweed jacket. No sign of Rosie Ive downstairs.

Alix went up to the first floor. Rosie was bending down to look at the crowded shelves, trying to see where she could squeeze in the scruffy hardbacks she held in each hand. Alix read the titles off the spines. *Moominland Midwinter* and *Spitfire Parade.*

"Sorry, it's me again."

Rosie straightened, put the books down on a stool. "What is it this time?"

"We never finished our conversation properly and now your mother won't talk to me at all."

"So why should I?"

"Because I want you to understand, the two of you can't hide the truth forever."

"What are you talking about?" Rosie demanded thickly.

"I've figured it out. The two of you were right, up to a point. Your father never killed those old people."

Rosie's cheeks had reddened. "What do you want from us?"

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"I'm right, aren't I?" Alix was exultant. It was an effort to restrain herself from punching the air.

Rosie took a step towards her. "You can't prove anything."

"Just tell me the truth."

Rosie reached out a muscular arm and seized Alix's scarf, jerking it tighter around the neck. "I'm saying nothing. Hear me? Nothing!"

And then Alix saw the look in her eyes and knew that she'd got it wrong after all. Not Jayne—*Rosie.*

"So it wasn't money," she said. The scarf was uncomfortable. Rosie wasn't strangling her, but she felt vulnerable and afraid. "A power thing? A cry for help? Munchausen's by Proxy, something like that?"

Rosie's head was very close to hers. The breath of a murderer warmed her cheeks.

"Rosie, you need help."

"My mum gives me all the help I need. Now leave us alone!"

Rosie let go of the scarf and raised a beefy arm, as if to hit her. Alix stumbled backwards, felt her feet giving way beneath her. She was off the ground now, arms flailing as she grabbed in vain for the railings that guarded the staircase. As she plunged headfirst, she screamed and Rosie cried out something about a terrible accident.

Falling, falling, falling. Any moment now her neck would snap. But what filled her mind at the last was the memory of Jayne Ive's angry, defiant face. Jayne, who had sacrificed the old folk, and sacrificed her husband, too.

She must have known. ●

Solution to the Mystery Crossword

S	A	R	A	■	W	E	E	P	■	R	E	M	A	P
E	M	I	R	■	A	M	E	S	■	A	D	E	L	E
N	O	T	I	■	F	I	R	S	T	T	O	D	I	E
D	R	A	G	N	E	T	■	T	O	T	■	A	N	N
■	■	■	H	A	R	S	H	■	T	A	B	L	E	■
D	I	T	T	O	S	■	A	D	A	N	O	■	■	■
E	D	I	T	S	■	A	N	I	L	■	O	B	I	T
A	E	R	O	■	A	N	D	E	S	■	K	A	T	E
D	E	E	D	■	C	O	L	T	■	S	E	D	E	R
■	■	■	I	R	E	N	E	■	M	O	D	E	R	N
■	B	R	E	A	D	■	S	C	E	N	T	■	■	■
M	A	E	■	K	I	T	■	A	R	E	O	L	A	E
A	T	I	M	E	T	O	D	I	E	■	D	E	R	R
T	E	N	O	R	■	M	O	R	S	■	I	N	T	O
E	S	S	E	S	■	B	E	N	T	■	E	T	E	S

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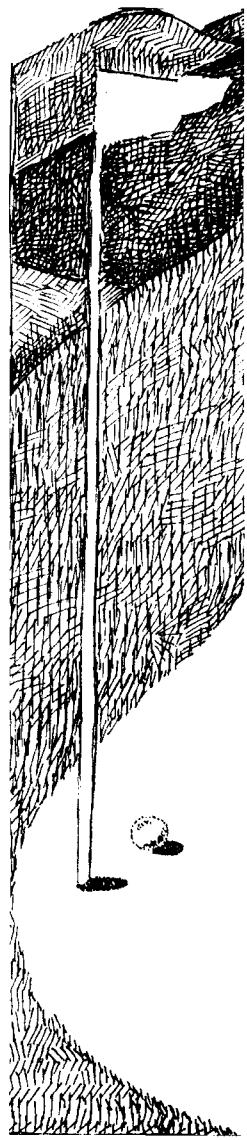
Fore!

by Katherine H. Brooks

It came to pass that I, one day,
Reluctantly agreed to play
Some golf, with one I called a friend
Right up until his tragic end.

Before attempting such, alas,
I'd thought in terms of spotted bass,
And little dreamed a new endeavor
Would end my fishing days forever.
This golfer, rest his soul departed,
Though jovial and merry-hearted,
Aroused me with his rather cutting
Remarks about my style of putting,
And openly appeared to thrive
On how misguided was my drive.
He laughed when I approached the rough
(By George! I felt I'd had enough!),
Noting, with crude and raucous yak,
The odd position of my back—
Quoting, with emphasis debasing,
The rules that govern turf replacing—
And, as his merriment increased,
I felt arise the inner beast,
Quick to offend at what he said—
And lightly clubbed him on the head.
I guess I got a bit excited
Before my anger was requited,
And, hence, went on to hack and chop,
Feeling so good I couldn't stop.
The cops, investigating later,
Compared his noggin to a crater,
And locked me up so snug, I've fears
I'll never break a hundred (years).

It's sad to grow a prison pallor,
While he, whose soul has found Valhalla,
Will never know I had such fun,
And made so many holes in one.



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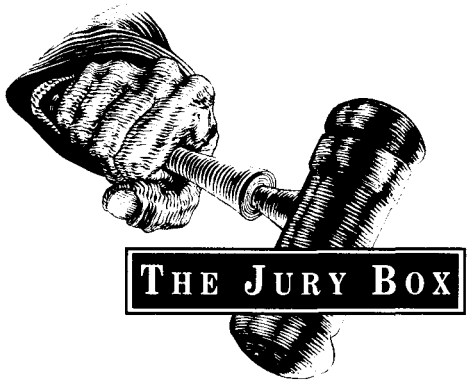

by Jon L. Breen

Rue Morgue Press is the old-mystery lover's best friend, reprinting high quality books from the 1930s and '40s, not necessarily by big-name writers. Having enjoyed their editions of the first two in Norbert Davis's wonderful and all-too-short series about Hollywood private eye Doan and his Great Dane partner Carstairs, I was eager to read the third and last, first published as a paperback original in 1946. Combining academic and beauty parlor backgrounds, *Oh, Murderer Mine* ($14) may be the least of the three but it's recommended to lovers of the farcical whodunit. Back in 1998, Rue Morgue brought us Clyde B. Clason's minor formalist classic *The Man From Tibet* (1938) and they have finally brought us another case for elderly classical scholar Theocritus Westborough, 1939's highly entertaining *Murder Gone Minoan* ($14.95), a closed-circle whodunit set on a private island off the California coast.

Also worth the wait is a new short-story collection that has long resided on Crippen & Landru's extensive and tantalizing forthcoming list.

*** William L. DeAndrea: *Murder—All Kinds,* Crippen & Landru, $29 clothbound, $19 trade paper. The author, who died in 1996 at a tragically young 44, was one of the best of the latter-day puzzle spinners and had a distinctively humorous narrative style. Following an introduction by his widow, Jane Haddam, are his only eleven short stories, four about TV network troubleshooter Matt Cobb, two about Sherlock Holmes (one of them in the style of Mickey Spillane!), the rest non-series. Apart from one *AHMM* story, two from non-genre periodicals, and one previously unpublished, all are from original anthologies. My own favorite is the new one, "Murder at the End of the World," with a background of college radio and featuring DeAndrea himself as first-

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person sleuth. (I'm sure the murder plot is fictional, but could the framing event, involving the emergency broadcast system, actually have happened?)

*** Julie Myerson: *Something Might Happen,* Little, Brown, $23.95. The effects of a young mother's murder in a small English beach town on her family and their closest friends is explored in an anti-detective story, that is, one like Diane Johnson's *The Shadow Knows* (1974) that uses mystery trappings without delivering all the elements the genre reader expects. Told in the present tense from the first-person viewpoint of Tess, mother of three and the victim's best friend, the novel is intensely involving, with a subtle paranormal element and echoes of the classic British film of not-quite-adultery, *Brief Encounter.* The decision to forgo quotation marks ultimately seems right, though it can occasionally be confusing. ("Alex says that what Lacey needs right now is a photo./Of her, he says, taking a mouthful of whisky, a nice little snap.")

*** Lyn Hamilton: *The Thai Amulet,* Berkley, $22.95. Toronto antique dealer Lara McClintoch goes to Bangkok, mainly to meet the family of her cop lover's daughter's boyfriend but also to find out what happened to a fellow dealer who has unaccountably vanished. Though I might have preferred a bit more surprise in the solution (and no, I'm not just disgruntled because I guessed wrong), this is a fine job of storytelling with involving characters, a tantalizing mystery, and full value from the Thai background.

*** Michael Jecks: *The Templar's Penance,* Headline/Trafalgar Square, $24.95. The scholarly Jecks includes a glossary of terms and a six-page author's note before beginning the tale of Baldwin Furnshill and Simon Puttock's sleuthing in Portugal in the course of a pilgrimage in 1323. Puzzle lovers will enjoy the duplicities of the large cast and the twists of the ornate plot, but this is not one of those historical series that will appeal to readers uninterested in history.

** Carol O'Connell: *Dead Famous,* Putnam, $24.95. New York cop Kathleen Mallory, always called by her last name, may be the only series sleuth designated as a sociopath, albeit an unusually charmless one on the right side of the law. The other unusual principals—her traumatized former partner, a hunchbacked beauty working as a crime-scene cleaner, and a radio shock jock so repellent I doubt he could attract an audience—occupy a nutty plot, involving a killer known as the Reaper who is knocking off jurors in a controversial murder trial. It's unbelievable on several counts, and the continuing trend to multi-volume soap opera is not a salutary one for mystery fiction. Still, give the

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author points for originality and narrative impetus. (I listened to the unabridged audiotape from Listen & Live Audio [$32.95], effectively read by Alyssa Bresnahan—I doubt it could be any better in print form.)

The welcome new edition of Dorothy B. Hughes's outstanding 1947 novel *In a Lonely Place* (Feminist Press at CUNY, $39 cloth, $14.95 trade paper), part of the Femmes Fatales: Women Write Pulp series, has a substantial afterword by Lisa Marie Hogeland and a publisher's foreword advancing a vague and wrongheaded notion of what constitutes pulp.

Radio Spirits, that admirable purveyor of classic radio, includes in *The New Adventures of Nero Wolfe* ($34.98 cassettes; $39.98 CDs) a 1946 episode with Francis X. Bushman and 17 from 1950-51 starring Sydney Greenstreet, who does a superb job apart from that unWolfean Caspar Gutman giggle. Science fiction icon Alfred Bester's script of "Stamped for Murder" may be the best (and truest to Rex Stout) of a highly varied but mostly creditable lot. (Though there are only two Wolfes represented, I counted six Archies, most frequently Harry Bartell.) Also available are such shows as *Dragnet, Richard Diamond, The Shadow,* and *Suspense,* along with a large selection of non-criminous comedy and drama. (For a catalog, call 1-800-833-4248 or visit www.radiospirits.com.)

The stars of those incomparable British TV adaptations of Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot novels and stories also do a commendable job as audiobook readers. David Suchet, that greatest of Poirots, reads 11 unabridged stories from the 14-tale 1925 collection *Poirot Investigates* (Audio Partners, $25.95 cassettes; $27.95 CD), while Hugh Fraser, a splendid Captain Hastings, shows Christie's gift for cunning misdirection was there from the beginning in a three-hour abridgment of the Belgian sleuth's 1920 debut, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (Audio Renaissance, $12.95 cassettes). At the same price and length, Audio Renaissance also offers entertaining versions of *The Seven Dials Mystery* (1929), from her parodic thriller period but no less deceptively plotted, read by Jenny Funnell; *Death on the Nile* (1937), one of the very best Poirots, read by David Timson; and *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* (1968), a novel of an aging Tuppence and Tommy Beresford that may be the last near-first-rate novel Christie wrote in her lifetime, read by Samantha Bond.

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BY KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

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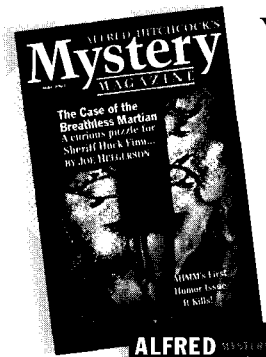

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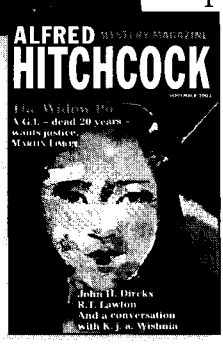

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